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## The Career Experience of Women in Senior-Level Leadership Positions within Power 5 Intercollegiate Athletic Departments: A Phenomenological Study

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Lynsey Miller entitled "The Career Experience of Women in Senior-Level Leadership Positions within Power 5 Intercollegiate Athletic Departments: A Phenomenological Study." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Higher Education Administration.

Dorian McCoy, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Patrick Biddix, Adam Love, Dara Worrell

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

The Career Experiences of Women in Senior-Level Leadership Positions within Power 5  
Athletic Departments: A Phenomenological Study

A Dissertation Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Lynsey Marie Miller

August 2021

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to collect data from eight senior-level female administrators working in Power 5 athletic departments. Four themes emerged from data analysis, including pathway to senior-level leadership, mentorship and support, stereotypes, and intersectional constraints. This research adds to the body of existing literature by further addressing the experiences of underrepresented groups within intercollegiate athletics administration, particularly within the Power 5 conferences. Theoretical contributions and practical implications for the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments are discussed.

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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to examine the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments. Existing research on this topic is presented in the review of literature. Though existing literature addresses the career experiences of underrepresented groups within Division I intercollegiate athletics administration, there is a lack of research exclusive to the Power 5. This research aims to add to the body of existing literature by further addressing the experiences of underrepresented groups within intercollegiate athletics administration, particularly within the Power 5 conferences.

The gender composition of the United States work force has changed dramatically over the past few decades (Hancock, 2012; Catalyst, 2020). According to the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, women accounted for approximately 47% of the United States labor force in 2019. Globally, women are attaining management positions in the U.S. more than ever before (Catalyst, 2019). Within higher education specifically, research indicates that the number of female college and university presidents increased from 10% to 30% from 1986 to 2016 (American Council on Education, 2017). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “women ages 25 and older account for more than half of the college-educated workforce – an 11% increase since 2000.” (Matias, 2019). Further, the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2012) indicates that women are achieving higher education levels than men giving them more human capital in the form of knowledge and expertise to bring to their organizations (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019).



Existing literature has examined the role of women in senior-level leadership positions and gender diversity within higher education and corporate America (Cunningham, 2011b; Denso & Ross, 2011; Joy et al., 2007; Konrad et al., 2008; Noland et al., 2016; Torchia et al., 2011; Walker & Melton, 2015). Research also indicates that organizations with female representation are more successful than those headed solely by men (Catalyst, 2013; Desvaux et al., 2007; Wittenberg-Cox, 2010; Wittenberg-Cox, 2014). Diverse and inclusive organizational climates have been linked to various benefits, including less turnover, improved team performance, higher employee satisfaction, better decision-making and problem-solving, and improved financial performance (Catalyst, 2013; Desvaux et al., 2007; Hoobler et al., 2018; Noland et al., 2016; Terjesen et al., 2009; Torchia et al., 2011). Moreover, the presence of women in executive positions has been shown to contribute to positive public images for organizations, which assists with talent acquisition and recruitment (Desvaux et al., 2007).

### **Benefits of Women in Senior-Level Leadership Positions in Higher Education**

#### **Administration**

Research from the Colorado Women's College indicates that higher education institutions with women in leadership positions often perform better than institutions without female leaders (Lennon, 2013; Longman & Madsen, 2014). For example, institutions with more female leadership boast higher revenue and receive more national research funding as compared to institutions with less female leadership (Lennon, 2013). Despite the benefits, women continue to be underrepresented at the senior-most levels of higher education administration (Hannum et al., 2015; Helfat et al., 2006; Hillman et al.,

2007; Lennon, 2013; Toutkoushian et al., 2007). Further, women continue to fall behind their male peers in advancement, promotion, and pay (Lennon, 2013; Miller, 2019). Research suggests that stakeholders will apply pressure to change business practices within higher education when they become aware of the greater returns with women in leadership roles (Lennon, 2013).

### **History of Female Administrators in Intercollegiate Athletics**

In order to grasp the underrepresentation of women in senior-level leadership positions within intercollegiate athletics administration, it is important to first understand the history of women in college sport. The Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (CIAW) was created in 1961 by a group of women working in athletics. The group was formed as a result of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) lack of interest in the development of women's sports. Through the CIAW, an organizational framework for women's competitive intercollegiate athletics was born (Bower & Hums, 2013). The CIAW later became the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) in 1971 and was the governing body for women's intercollegiate athletics until 1981 (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010). At the time, most women's teams were being coached by women and upwards of 90% of women's athletic departments were led by women (Bower & Hums, 2013).

### **Title IX**

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is a federal law that gives girls and women equal opportunity in sport and requires that any educational institutions that receive federal funds do not exclude an individual from participation in their education

based on sex (Women's Sports Foundation, 2019). Soon after the passage of Title IX, the NCAA voted to remove athletics from the AIAW's jurisdiction, thus absorbing women's athletics programs. Since the passage of Title IX, despite an increase in female participation in sport, there is still a small number of women in leadership positions (Longman & Madsen, 2014). Though the NCAA strives to create gender equity for student-athletes, there is an imbalance between men and women in coaching and administrative positions (NCAA, 2019).

### **Establishment of the Senior Woman Administrator (SWA) Position**

The Senior Woman Administrator (SWA) position, the highest-ranking female working in intercollegiate athletics administration at each institution, was created in 1981 (NCAA, 2019). The position was created to ensure that women were involved in the male-dominated administration of intercollegiate athletics. The creation of this position seems highly necessary being that women occupy just 22% of athletic director (AD) positions nationwide (Equity in Athletics Data Analysis, 2016; NCAA, 2019). A 2017 report card issued by The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) also indicated that just seven Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) schools (4.6%) had a female AD (Lapchick, 2017). According to a 2016 NCAA report, 11.3% of NCAA institutions did not have any female athletic administrators.

### **The Demise of Female Athletic Directors**

One reason for the demise of female ADs is the merging of men's and women's athletic departments (Grappendorf & Lough, 2006). Prior to Title IX, most athletic departments had a male AD in charge of the men's department and a female AD in

charge of the women's department. However, when departments began to merge, the female AD position was often eliminated, as men were typically seen as more competent to provide department leadership (Grappendorf & Lough, 2006). Intercollegiate athletics continues to be sex-segregated following traditional gender roles with men in significantly more senior leadership roles, and women in more subordinate, less powerful positions (Burton et al., 2009; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007; Tiell & Dixon, 2008).

### **Parallels Between Corporate America and Intercollegiate Athletics**

The commercialization of Division I athletic departments in recent years has been compared to that of large corporations (Gurney et al., 2017; Swaton, 2010). Research has drawn parallels between the success of companies with women in executive positions and the success possible by hiring women in senior-level leadership positions within intercollegiate athletics (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Cunningham, 2008; Cunningham, 2011a; Cunningham, 2011b; Lumpkin et al., 1999; Peachey & Burton, 2011; Rosette & Tost, 2010; Springer, 2008; Swaton, 2010). Swaton (2010) argues "With Division I athletic departments now being run like corporations, the question becomes: Why has this trend not expanded into the world of athletic leadership?" (Swaton, 2010, p. 5). Given the empirical evidence, increased female representation in executive positions could bring benefits to intercollegiate athletic departments.

### **Statement of Problem**

Despite the benefits, which are discussed in depth in Chapter II, women continue to be underrepresented in senior-level leadership positions in a male-dominated sport contexts, including international federations, national sport organizations, and

intercollegiate athletics within the U.S. (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Lapchick, 2018; Sydney Scoreboard, 2018). Though a large body of research examines the career experiences of women in sport leadership roles, particularly at the intercollegiate level (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton, 2015; Cunningham, 2010; Edwards et al., 2020; Katz, Walker & Hindman, 2018; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Smith et al., 2019; Walker & Bopp, 2010; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013), there is a lack of research addressing the career experiences of women in sport leadership roles within the Power 5 athletic conferences. Patti Phillips, Chief Executive of Women Leaders in College Sports, states: “The Power 5 level is the most male-dominated part of college athletics. Because of the money and because of big-time football and basketball, which have traditionally been sort of the male, boys’ club things. It’s much harder for women to break into these roles because of that.” (Blinder, 2019).

This qualitative study seeks to provide a better understanding of both the underrepresentation of women in senior-level leadership roles within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration, as well as their career experiences.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics departments. I utilized intersectionality as a construct of feminist theory, using semi-structured interviews with women in Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments. The intent of interviewing women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5

intercollegiate athletic departments was to provide insight into their unique career experiences.

### **Significance of the Study**

Given the underrepresentation of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments, decision makers should develop policies and programs and design structures aimed at increasing the number of female coaches, advisors, decision makers, officials, administrators, and sport personnel at all levels (Burton & Leberman, 2017). Further, research suggests that the recruitment, mentoring, empowerment, reward, and retention of female leaders should be a focus of sport organizations (Burton & Leberman, 2017). Hartzell and Dixon (2019) argue that if sport organizations consider the benefits of a gender diverse leadership team, and work to develop and implement policies and practices that promote diversity, they will yield multiple positive benefits.

Understanding the unique career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within the Power 5 is a necessary step in creating systemic change within intercollegiate athletics administration. It is critical to examine whether the organizational and systemic cultures of intercollegiate athletics contribute to both the limited opportunities and career experiences of women in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration. This research aims to add to the body of sport leadership literature by obtaining information directly from women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments. Further, this research aims to assist in informing and/or creating policies that will recognize and improve leadership

opportunities and career experiences for women in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For the purposes of this research, the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics were examined through a feminist theory lens. Feminist theory seeks to analyze gender as a category of experience in society (Coakley & Dunning, 2000). In this case, gender was analyzed as a category of the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments. Intersectionality was used as a construct of feminist theory in conceptualizing the relationship between systems of oppression (e.g., within sport). Coined in 1989 by American professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality can be defined as a framework for understanding the ways in which multiple identities (e.g., race, gender, class, political affiliation, sexual orientation, etc.) intersect to create unique experiences. Carastathis (2014) states: “In feminist theory, intersectionality has become the predominant way of conceptualizing the relation between systems of oppression which construct our multiple identities and our social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege.” (Carastathis, 2014, p. 304). Thus, this research draws from feminist theory and intersectionality literature (Crenshaw, 1991) in understanding the influence of marginalized identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation) on one’s career experiences.

Utilizing a feminist theory lens to interpret the data served to enrich this research in that it allowed data to be viewed from a perspective of equality and social justice for

female intercollegiate athletics administrators (Walker & Melton, 2015). Further, utilizing intersectionality as a construct of feminist theory allowed me to capture the interwoven nature of systems of oppression. Therefore, by acknowledging intersectionality within this research, the exploration of social relations within intercollegiate athletics administration can be better understood. This may create a platform for women's voices to be heard within the context of intercollegiate athletics administration. Further, this may serve to inform female athletic administrators within Division I intercollegiate athletics, as well as institutions of higher education and athletics governing bodies (e.g., National Collegiate Athletic Association, conference offices, etc.). In informing institutions and governing bodies, knowledge of oppressive situations may be discovered, and social action may be taken to combat the marginalization of women within intercollegiate athletics administration.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative study was guided by the following questions:

**RQ1:** What are the backgrounds of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments (sport participation, coaching, educational, career)?

**RQ2:** What are the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments?

**RQ3:** What resources/supports do women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments desire in their professional development?



## **Overview of Research Design**

This study was phenomenological in nature and utilized semi-structured interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research focuses on inquiring or investigating a phenomenon in a systematic manner. Further, qualitative researchers seek to understand how individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenology is defined as “knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13).

I employed criterion sampling. Criterion sampling is recommended, as the qualitative design requires participation from individuals who have worked in similar environments (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The study sample was drawn from the population of women working in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments using snowball, or network sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Specific details of the research design are provided in Chapter 3.

## **Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations**

The following assumptions were present in this study: a) It was assumed that interviewees would not be deceptive in their answers, and that participants would answer interview questions honestly and to the best of their ability. For example, when asked for demographic information (e.g., age, race, years of experience, etc.), or to describe their career experiences (e.g., career barriers), it was assumed that participants would be truthful in their answers; b) It was assumed that this study would provide an accurate representation of the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions

within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments. I utilized member checking as a method of trustworthiness in ensuring that participant experiences are accurately portrayed. Further, if a participant felt as though their experience had not been accurately portrayed, they had the option to withdraw their participation in the study; c). It was assumed that women in sport leadership positions, sport governing bodies (e.g., NCAA, conference offices), and institutions of higher education would benefit from further research regarding the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 athletics.

This study is limited, as it includes only Power 5 institutions. Further, the number of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments is limited. A portion of those individuals were interviewed in this research. Interviewing other women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 athletic departments may yield different themes. However, interviews were conducted until saturation was met (Charmaz, 2014; Guest et al., 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Another limitation of this research is the interpretation of interview transcripts, as another researcher may interpret the data differently than I did. Finally, because interviews were conducted via Zoom versus in person, participant reactions or body language may have been missed, thus limiting follow-up questions.

A delimitation of this study is that the data is confined to the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics departments. Career experiences may vary from women in senior-level leadership positions within athletic departments outside of the Power 5 conferences. Further,

participant career experiences may vary from women working in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration that have not yet reached senior-level leadership positions. Findings may not be generalizable to all women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration. Another delimitation of this research is that it is limited to Power 5 intercollegiate athletics departments within the United States. Therefore, findings may not be generalizable to all women in sport leadership positions.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

***Academic Progress Rate (APR)*** – Holds institutions accountable for the academic progress of their student-athletes through a team-based metric that accounts for the eligibility and retention of each student-athlete for each academic term (ncaa.org).

***Athletic Director (AD)*** – The AD acts as the chief executive officers (CEO) and is tasked with revenue generation while being supported by assistant and associate ADs who are responsible for the day-to-day department operations (Ridpath, 2016).

***Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS)*** – Formerly known as Division I-A, is the top level of college football in the United States. The FBS is the most competitive subdivision of NCAA Division I, which itself consists of the largest and most competitive schools in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Football\\_Bowl\\_Subdivision](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Football_Bowl_Subdivision)).

***Intercollegiate Sport*** – A sport played at the collegiate level for which eligibility requirements for participation are established by the governing body of collegiate athletics (<https://www.lawinsider.com/dictionary/intercollegiate-sport>).

***National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (DI)*** – Refers to the highest level of intercollegiate athletics sanctioned by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in the United States. These institutions are categorized as Football Championship Subdivision (FCS), Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), or non-football programs ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NCAA\\_Division\\_I](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NCAA_Division_I)).

***Power 5*** - Refers to the Power 5 athletic conferences, whose members are part of the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) of NCAA Division I, the highest level of collegiate football in the United States. The Power 5 conferences include the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten Conference (B1G), Big 12 Conference, PAC-12 Conference, and Southeastern Conference (SEC).

***Senior-Level Administration*** – Senior-level administration is inclusive of Athletic Directors, Associate Athletic Directors, and Assistant Athletic Directors. Associate athletic directors are senior to assistant athletic directors in the power structure of intercollegiate athletic departments (Lapchick, 2018).

***Senior Woman Administrator*** - Designation given to the highest-ranking woman in the athletic department that is not the athletic director (NCAA.org).

### **Summary**

This study sought understand the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments. While previous research has addressed the career experiences of women in leadership roles within Division I intercollegiate athletics, there is a knowledge gap in the career experiences of

women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments, as well as in the way/s in which intersectionality affects the career experiences of underrepresented groups within intercollegiate athletics administration (e.g., Asian, Latina, etc.). The findings of this research may serve multiple stakeholders, including sport governing bodies (e.g., NCAA, conference offices), managers, employers, and women working in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration. Further, knowledge of oppressive situations may be discovered, and social action may be taken to combat the marginalization of underrepresented groups within intercollegiate athletics administration.

In this chapter, a disaggregation of gender composition in the U.S. workforce was provided. Benefits of gender diversity in “Corporate America” and higher education were also presented, as well as the history of women in intercollegiate athletics. Parallels were drawn from the benefits of gender diversity seen in Corporate America and higher education to those that may be seen by increasing gender diversity in intercollegiate athletics. The problem, purpose and research questions were presented, along with the significance of the study, a brief overview of the theoretical framework and research design, assumptions/limitations, and key terms. Chapter II provides a comprehensive review of literature on the experiences of women in intercollegiate athletics administration from the macro, meso, and micro levels. Chapter III addresses the methodology for this study, including the research design and specific methods for how I conducted the study. Study findings, including four themes and 11 sub-themes, and the

essence of participant experiences are presented in Chapter IV. Chapter V includes a study summary, conclusions and implications, and recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In this review of literature, women's career experiences in intercollegiate athletics administration are presented using a multi-level approach (macro, meso and micro). From the macro-level perspective, intercollegiate athletics administration demographics, stakeholder influence, and institutional discrimination are presented. Next, on the meso-level, hegemonic masculinity and organizational operations, including hegemonic masculinity, culture, stereotypes, intercollegiate athletics work-life balance, and access and treatment discrimination are discussed. Finally, human and social capital (including job experience, education, playing/coaching experience, and mentoring/social networks) and self-limiting behaviors are presented on the micro-level.

### **Introduction**

Despite increased opportunities for girls and women to participate in sport, women continue to be underrepresented in athletic director (AD) positions across all divisions of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in the U.S. (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton, 2015; NCAA, 2019). Though more women have been hired in both higher education and intercollegiate athletics in recent years, the concern for homosocial reproduction in hiring practices remains (Longman & Madsen, 2014; Hancock & Hums, 2016). Homosocial reproduction refers to the tendency of hiring managers to select employees similar to themselves (Smith, 2013). Judith White, Executive Director of the Higher Education Resources Services (HERS) believes that women are needed in senior-level leadership positions within higher education in order to “meet the need for a diverse cadre of leaders that is capable of responding to the

challenges of a rapidly changing environment” (Longman & Madsen, 2014, p. xiii).

Burton (2015) argued that despite increased open-mindedness, women may still be vetted on their gendered “fit” for intercollegiate athletics (e.g., flexible personal schedule, the absence of young children, previous senior-level experience, etc.). According to Women Leaders in College Sports, an advocacy and professional development group, 68 women were hired as ADs or conference commissioners across college athletics in 2018, up from 19 in 2012 (Blinder, 2019). However, most of those hires were at the Division II or III levels, which seems to be a training ground for aspiring female athletic administrators. Patti Phillips, Chief Executive of Women Leaders in College Sports, states “The Power Five level is the most male-dominated part of college athletics. Because of the money and because of big-time football and basketball, which have traditionally been sort of the male, boys’ club things. It’s much harder for women to break into these roles because of that” (Blinder, 2019).

Institutional gender bias of women in leadership positions within sport has led to a lack of opportunity (Burton & Leberman, 2017). However, the culture seems to be changing. Researchers indicate that women are needed in intercollegiate athletic administration as they “add some unique perspectives, styles and skills through their ability to build relationships through encouragement, flexibility, delegation and nurturing – traits more characteristic of women” (Lumpkin et al., 1999, p. 186). Sport organizations are beginning to recognize the benefits of diversity and inclusion within their organizations (Burton & Leberman, 2017). Nefertiti Walker and Nicole Melton took part in the 2014 espnW project “Open Look.” Walker and Melton suggested that within



inclusive sport organizations, employees are more satisfied, less likely to leave, and more outspoken with their ideas (Burton & Leberman, 2017). College athletic departments with women in leadership positions are more successful in measures such as team wins, and employees' feelings of success" (espnW, 2014).

A large body of research examines the unique experiences of women in sport leadership roles, particularly at the intercollegiate level (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton, 2015; Hancock et al., 2017; Hancock & Hums, 2016; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Melton & Cunningham, 2014; Smith et al., 2019; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Taylor & Wells, 2017; Walker & Melton, 2015). Research shows that a strong organizational climate is a good indicator of the comfort level of diverse employees within their organizations (Melton & Cunningham, 2014; Walker & Melton, 2015). An inclusive organizational climate can lead to many positive organizational outcomes, including increased job satisfaction, enhanced organizational commitment, decreased turnover, and improved employee well-being (Cunningham, 2011a, 2011b).

### **Macro Level**

The macro (or structural/large scale) level of sport organizations provides an examination of factors that may contribute to women's experiences in leadership positions within sport organizations. From the macro level, the political climate of athletics organizations, stakeholder expectations, and institutional discrimination can affect women's career experiences (Cunningham, 2010). Sport must be recognized as a gendered institution, wherein male athletes are taught to exhibit masculine characteristics

from a young age and girls are taught to embody feminine characteristics such as emotion, empathy, and need (Kolnes, 1995).

### **Intercollegiate Athletics Administration Demographics**

Men dominate leadership positions in sport organizations, both internationally and in the U.S. (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton, 2015; International Working Group on Women and Sport, 2012; Lapchick, 2018; Lapchick, 2019). At the collegiate level, within Division I Bowl Championship Series (BCS) institutions, men hold the majority of AD positions, a larger number of head coaching positions within women's sport programs, as well as almost all of the head coaching positions within men's sport programs (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton, 2015; Lapchick, 2019). Approximately 11% of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) institutions across the U.S. have no female representation on the executive or senior level athletics staff (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Despite the NCAA's Pledge and Commitment to Promoting Diversity and Gender Equity in Intercollegiate Athletics (NCAA, 2017), only 19.5% of campus athletics leadership positions were held by women in 2019, a decrease of 6.9% since 2018 (Lapchick, 2019). The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) also indicated that just seven Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) schools (4.6%) have a female AD (Lapchick, 2019).

### **Stakeholder Influence**

Intercollegiate athletic department stakeholders include alumni, faculty, staff, donors, students, student-athletes, and administrators. Schull et al. (2013) examined the gendered political process in AD searches wherein men's and women's athletic departments were merging. Findings showed that stakeholders interested in maintaining

power within the women's programs supported the hiring of a male AD for fear of a female AD being "eaten up alive" by stakeholders affiliated with the men's program (Schull et al., 2013, p. 72). As a result of the power and political influence that stakeholders affiliated with the men's program had, university decision makers, financial support, and media constituents were far more accessible. Although the hiring criteria appeared to be gender neutral, it "privileged a certain type of masculinity in the sport context – a man who values gender equity" (Schull et al., 2013, p. 76). Stakeholders can power the diversity and inclusivity of intercollegiate athletics administration (Taylor & Wells, 2017). Findings of Taylor & Wells (2017) showed that women tend to advance in their careers when they have the support of multiple stakeholders. The most influential stakeholder cited by participants was a male AD. Throughout their careers, none of the participants had ever worked for a female AD. This reiterates the institutionalized practice that operates within sport organizations (Lackner & Zulehner, 2020; Taylor & Wells, 2017; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013).

### **Institutional Discrimination**

Walker and Sartore-Baldwin (2013) examined institutional discrimination within men's intercollegiate sport. In addressing the few women coaching men's teams at the intercollegiate level, findings indicated an existence of gender-based discrimination of women in coaching. Walker and Sartore-Baldwin argued that the long-term viability of intercollegiate athletics is threatened by the premise that it is one of last social institutions to exclude women. This research called for stakeholders to recognize the gender exclusivity that exists within intercollegiate athletics and, in turn, implement policy that

maintains the viability of intercollegiate sport (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). This reiterates the importance of stakeholders in the decision-making process within intercollegiate athletics. Taylor and Wells (2017) found that both athletic donors and female ADs accept things as they are when it comes to institutional discrimination. An example of this is women in senior-level athletics administration positions being conned into doing more board or committee work for the simple fact that there are less women in these positions (Taylor & Wells, 2017).

### **Meso Level**

In addition to institutional discrimination of women in sport, research has investigated the influence of organizational operations on the experiences of women in intercollegiate athletics administration (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton & Peachey, 2014; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Nastvogel, 2018; Smith et al., 2019; Yiamouyiannis & Osborne, 2012). In examining leadership in intercollegiate athletics, research on the meso (or community/organizational) level focuses on organizational factors and the way decisions are made (Cunningham, 2010). Examples of meso-level factors influencing leadership within intercollegiate athletics include hegemonic masculinity, institutional discrimination, and organizational operations (Burton, 2015).

### **Hegemonic Masculinity**

Hegemonic masculinity exists wherein one form of masculinity (e.g., exclusively heterosexual, and physically dominant) are overemphasized, resulting in the overpowering of all other forms of masculinity and subordinating women (Connell, 1995). Hegemonic masculinity applies to the ways in which gender ideals are embedded

into social practices (e.g., within sport). Historically, an informal group of White men characterized by exclusivity and gender restrictive support systems have progressed into senior-level positions within intercollegiate athletics (Taylor & Wells, 2017). This group has traditionally been referred to as the “good old boys’ network” (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Lovett & Lowery, 1994). However, intercollegiate athletics has seen a shift toward a more inclusive culture, wherein historically underrepresented groups are being mentored toward advancement and included in recruitment and hiring practices (Cunningham & Singer, 2009).

Whisenant, et al., (2002) examined the influence of hegemonic masculinity on the advancement of women in senior-level leadership positions within intercollegiate athletics, as opposed to their male counterparts. Findings indicated that men maintain control of AD positions at the highest levels of intercollegiate athletics (NCAA Division I). Men also had higher rates of career advancement at the Division I level as compared with women. Grappendorf & Lough (2006) also supports the role of hegemonic masculinity within intercollegiate athletics, detailing the underrepresentation of female ADs within merged intercollegiate athletic departments. Walker and Sartore-Baldwin (2013) studied hegemonic masculinity and institutional bias within intercollegiate men’s basketball. Utilizing semi structured interviews, findings indicated a masculine culture within men’s basketball (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). Participants acknowledged hegemonic masculinity, gender exclusivity, and resistance to change as barriers to women pursuing coaching positions within intercollegiate men’s basketball. Walker & Sartore-Baldwin (2013) suggested that hiring managers should develop and implement

gender inclusive policies that promote diversity and inclusion. Intersectionality, which is addressed in depth later in this chapter, is a framework for understanding the ways that multiple aspects of identity intersect to create unique experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). Price et al. (2015) investigated Black women's intersectionality in athletic administration. This research sought to understand how Black women perceive their experiences to fit into the White, hegemonic organizational culture of intercollegiate athletics (Price et al., 2015). Findings indicated that race and racism operate at two levels: macro and meso. On the macro-level, participants indicated that, as a result of the "color-blind" nature of intercollegiate athletics, Whiteness is perpetuated, thus creating a subtle hierarchy over underrepresented groups. Participants cited their experiences of color-blind racism (see Bonilla-Silva, 2003) and institutional practices which favor Whiteness and create disadvantages for underrepresented groups (Price et al., 2015). Bonilla-Silva (2003) states that color-blind racism allows whites the ability to deny a social hierarchy by asserting that society is based on a race neutral meritocracy. On the meso-level, all participants consistently noted that they "do not see color" (Price et al., 2015, p. 110). Researchers argue that this notion of "color-blindness" by People of Color further perpetuates racial hierarchies within intercollegiate athletics. Further, if People of Color deny the existence of this hierarchy, "the ability to counteract hegemonic interruptions of superiority will continue" (Price et al., 2015, p. 120).

### **Organizational Operations**

Recent research has examined organizational operations within intercollegiate athletics administration. Smith et al. (2019) studied NCAA Division I senior woman

administrators' (SWAs) perceptions of barriers to career mobility. All participants discussed gender equity and Title IX being the sole responsibility of the SWA position, thus limiting the contributions of their male peers in these areas. The perception that SWAs are solely responsible for these areas is an example of institutionalized practices within intercollegiate athletic departments. This sole responsibility serves to limit the power of women in intercollegiate athletics (Ely & Padavic, 2007). Participants of Smith et al. (2019) also cited the presence of bullying in intercollegiate athletics administration. Smith et al. (2019) suggested that bullying is accepted in intercollegiate athletics administration as a form of gender normalcy. This ties into the notion of institutional discrimination that operates within intercollegiate athletics, which was also addressed in the macro-level discussion (Taylor & Wells, 2017; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013).

### ***Culture***

Nastvogel et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative case study to examine the masculine culture of intercollegiate athletics and its influence on the representation of women in senior-level leadership positions. The culture of masculinity was defined as a culture in which men are preferred over women and women are required to change their personalities (Nastvogel et al., 2018). Findings showed that the culture of masculinity in intercollegiate athletics limited opportunities for women, affected confidence, and resulted in stereotypes in athletic administration. Amongst female coaches, this culture resulted in altered confidence, limited opportunities, and decreased motivation to apply for jobs (Nastvogel et al., 2018; Walker & Bopp, 2010; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). Participants exhibited a lack of confidence to apply for senior-level positions due

to the influx of men already in the senior-most positions. Though it was not explicitly stated by participants, a thematic analysis suggested the lack of confidence was due to both limited opportunities for women and the stereotypical nature of intercollegiate athletics (Nastvogel et al., 2018). A lack of opportunity for women was also cited, stating “the doors are always open for men” (Nastvogel et al., 2018, p. 73). However, Nastvogel et al. (2018) argued that if there are women in power positions, and they choose to speak up, these women can change the culture to afford other women opportunities at senior-level positions.

### ***Stereotypes***

Gender stereotypes continue to operate within the constructs of intercollegiate athletics administration (Burton et al., 2011; Hanks et al., 2019; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Nastvogel et al., 2018; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Gender stereotypes influence the experiences of women in intercollegiate athletics administration roles. Findings of Nastvogel et al. (2018) indicated the belief that women are emotional, cannot handle themselves with power, and are too busy taking care of family as common stigmas that influence women when they pursue senior-level positions. Participants of Nastvogel et al.’s (2018) study indicated the need to be aggressive in order to be heard. Being aggressive was cited as a mode of survival for women in athletics, a non-negotiable characteristic. Likewise, findings of McDowell and Carter-Francique’s (2017) study, which is discussed at length later in this chapter, indicated the presence of occupational stereotyping and gender role conflict as well as racial and gender stereotypes within intercollegiate athletics administration.



### ***Intercollegiate Athletics & Work-Life Balance***

Additional research on gender and organizational structure has focused on work-family and family-work balance and the ways in which gender constrains the career advancement and experiences of women in sport leadership positions (Bower et al., 2015; Nastvogel et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2017; Taylor & Wells, 2017). Participants in Smith et al.'s (2019) study indicated the work-family conflict as a barrier to attaining a senior-level position in intercollegiate athletics. This may be attributed to women's purposeful career decisions to avoid work-family conflicts. Nastvogel et al. (2018) cited differing interview treatment of men and women in intercollegiate athletics administration. Specifically, interview questions regarding the presence of spouses or children. Bower et al. (2015) indicated that men and women are treated very differently regarding family issues. This supports the gender model of how balancing work and family creates challenges for women in intercollegiate athletics administration (Bower et al., 2015).

Certain procedures can be implemented by intercollegiate athletic departments to help facilitate a work-life balance for women in senior-level roles including the allowance of travel for children, spouses, and partners to away competitions, attendance at home athletic events, flexible work hours, and the option to work from home (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Taylor et al., 2017). Although many intercollegiate athletic departments offer benefits to assist women in senior-level positions with work-life balance, many women in these positions do not take advantage of them (Dixon et al.,

2008). This could indicate that intercollegiate athletics departmental culture may not be supportive of female employees utilizing these benefits (Taylor & Wells, 2017).

### ***Access & Treatment Discrimination***

On both the organizational and institutional levels, research has addressed access and treatment discrimination of women within intercollegiate athletics administration (Burton, 2015, Gurney et al., 2017; LaVoi, 2016). Access discrimination occurs when certain groups are denied the opportunity to enter an organization (Greenhaus et al., 1990). Walker and Bopp (2010) found that women are continually denied access to coaching opportunities within men's sports. As such, research shows that the "good old boys" network perpetuates access denial for women in sport organizations, as these networks allow individuals with similar characteristics to maintain power and influence over the organization (Hoffman, 2011; Regan & Cunningham, 2012). For example, women in SWA positions have been denied opportunities to oversee areas of athletics that are vital to their career development (budgets, men's sports programs) (Hoffman, 2010; Tiell et al., 2012). Without experience in budgetary decision-making, women will continue to be denied access to the AD position (Lough & Grappendorf, 2007; Taylor & Hardin, 2016).

Gurney et al. (2017) discussed access discrimination of women in coaching and administration. They summarized data from LaVoi's (2016) survey on women in coaching. Findings indicated that the majority of current and former female coaches were hired by male ADs, female coaches did not have equal access to the resources necessary for success (e.g., office space, financial resources, professional development), female

coaches risked their employment if they spoke up about gender equality issues, men were more likely to be promoted or rewarded with salary increases for successful performances, and women's coaching styles were criticized more often (LaVoi, 2016). Data from the NCAA's sport sponsorship, participation, and demographics search database was also highlighted, indicating that women hold fewer non-coaching administration positions across all levels of the NCAA.

### **Micro Level**

Women's career experiences have been discussed from the institutional (or macro) level, as well as the organizational (or meso) level of intercollegiate athletics. Research on the micro-level has focused on "the meaning women give to their career experiences, their expectations, understandings of power, and procedures operating at the organizational level" (Burton, 2015, p. 161). Existing research on the micro-level examines the role of human and social capital in intercollegiate athletics administration (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Bower & Hums, 2013; Bower & Hums, 2014; Grappendorf et al., 2017; Hancock & Hums, 2015; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Hanks et al., 2019; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Sagas & Cunningham, 2004; Walker & Bopp, 2010; Wong, 2014; Yiamouyiannis, 2008). Self-limiting behaviors of women in intercollegiate athletics administration have also been explored (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007; Smith et al., 2019).

### **Human & Social Capital**

An individual gains human capital through education, training, and job experience (Burton, 2015). Regardless of industry, gaining skills and job competencies are critical to

career development, expectations, and goals (Wentling, 2003; Whitmarsh et al., 2007). Gaining skills and job competencies allows for the likelihood that an employee will persist in the face of career obstacles (Wentling, 2003). The literature indicates that job experience is far more critical than education in the career advancement of women working in Division I intercollegiate athletics administration (Bower et al., 2015; Hancock & Hums; 2015; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). The importance of gaining experience as an assistant and associate AD has been highlighted, as these roles have been identified on the path to achieving the position of athletic director (AD) (Grappendorf et al., 2004; Hanks et al., 2019; Katz et al., 2018; Lapchick, 2010; Smith et al., 2019; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Educational background also remains a critical factor in the career advancement of women working in Division I intercollegiate athletics administration (Bower et al., 2015; Hanks et al., 2019; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Lumpkin et al., 2015; Wong, 2014). Across all divisions of the NCAA, ADs most often obtain graduate degrees in sport management. Although this is not the only path to athletic director, it is the most common educational background (Lumpkin et al., 2015).

Playing and coaching experience as well as involvement in social networks are critical in the career advancement of women in Division I intercollegiate athletics administration (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Hancock et al., 2017; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Katz et al., 2018; Lumpkin et al., 2015; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Wong, 2014). The existing body of literature addresses the ways in which playing and/or coaching experience correlates with career advancement (Acosta & Carpenter,

2014; Bower & Hums, 2013; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Lumpkin et al., 2015; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Wong, 2014). Mentoring and social networks are critical in both the career experiences and advancement of women in senior-level leadership positions within intercollegiate athletics (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Bower & Hums, 2014; Hancock et al., 2017; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Katz et al., 2018; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Taylor & Wells, 2017).

### ***Job Experience***

The career advancement of women in intercollegiate athletics administration is dependent on gaining relevant experience (Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Women in roles on the path toward athletic director positions (e.g., senior woman administrator) are perceived as more likely to obtain AD positions than those in academic counselor, student-athlete development, and compliance roles (Hanks et al., 2019; Katz et al., 2018; Lapchick, 2010; Smith et al., 2019; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). The skill sets associated with those in positions on the path to AD (e.g., budgeting, marketing, fundraising, supervisory responsibilities) are perceived to be more transferrable to AD positions (Hardin et al., 2013; Katz et al., 2018; Lapchick, 2010; Smith et al., 2019; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Additionally, experience with highly visible football and basketball programs that generate significant revenue is an established track toward the AD position (Hoffman, 2010). In examining the experiences and challenges of female NCAA Division I ADs, Taylor and Hardin (2016) concluded that there are four primary means to reaching maximum career mobility: a) lack of female role models, b) females are not qualified to manage football programs, c) scrutiny about lack of ability and experience, and d)

benefits of intercollegiate coaching experience. Women also face increased scrutiny from the public, the media, and others regarding their lack of experience with non-female sports, especially football (Taylor & Hardin, 2016).

Hancock (2012) examined the career development of female assistant and associate ADs at NCAA Division I institutions. Findings indicated that the average career length was 16 years, suggesting that previous experience in intercollegiate athletics is critical in the career advancement of women in senior-level leadership positions within Division I intercollegiate athletics administration. Half of the participants interviewed indicated that they did not have an interest in becoming an AD. This finding converges with other research indicating that achieving the AD position is not a career goal for women working in intercollegiate athletics administration (Grappendorf et al., 2004; Sagas & Cunningham, 2004; Smith et al., 2019). This may be attributed to the career interests of women, and the value women place on the support, growth, and development of student-athletes (Hancock & Hums, 2016).

### ***Education***

In recent years, limited attention has been placed on the educational preparation of ADs (Lumpkin et al., 2015). Women are achieving higher education levels than men, giving them more human capital in the form of knowledge and expertise to bring to their organizations (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019). Wong (2014) noted that nearly 90% of ADs hired since 2009 have advanced degrees. Women seem to have an advantage, as they are obtaining more degrees than men at all levels (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). In addition, Division I female ADs are more likely to have master's and doctoral

degrees than their male counterparts (Lumpkin et al., 2015). Still, higher levels of education do not necessarily equate to career advancement for women in intercollegiate athletics administration (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019).

NCAA Division I ADs are more likely to have degrees in communications or Juris Doctorates (J.D.) than a physical education degree when compared to Division II ADs (Lumpkin et al., 2015). Jessup (2013) suggested that a background in communications may reflect the need for Division I ADs to possess great communication skills, as they are expected to interact with fans, media, and donors to support their programs. A background in communications is especially important for ADs working at institutions in the power conferences, as stakeholders entrust ADs to establish financially and athletically successful programs (Jessup, 2013). Moreover, a legal background may assist aspiring Division I ADs with compliance and NCAA rules (Lumpkin et al., 2015).

In studying the challenges of women working in intercollegiate athletics administration, demographic information from Bower et al. (2015) showed that 72.5% of participants held master's degrees, 5.6% held doctoral degrees, and 3.7% held Juris Doctorate degrees. Only 16% of participants indicated a bachelor's degree as their highest degree. Findings of Bower and Hums (2013), which examined the career paths of women working in leadership positions within intercollegiate athletics administration also indicated that education is important, stating that more than 66% of their sample obtained master's degrees. In addition to education, Bower and Hums (2013) indicated that women should obtain as much experience as possible early in their careers (e.g., internships, volunteer work, etc.). Moreover, staying out of positions that are not on the

path toward AD (e.g., academics and compliance) is critical to leadership. This is especially important for Black women who aspire to attain senior-level administrative positions within intercollegiate athletics (Hanks et al., 2019).

### ***Playing & Coaching Experience***

Historically, ADs have had experience both as student-athletes and as coaches (Fitzgerald et al., 1994). However, intercollegiate athletics has seen a migration away from administrators with coaching experience and toward administrators with business experience (Hardin et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2019). Though there is existing literature examining this phenomenon, research has yielded mixed findings. For example, Landry (1983) cited five steps in the succession on the career path to AD: 1) compete as a student-athlete, 2) coach high school, 3) coach college as a head or assistant coach, 4) become an assistant or associate AD, and 5) become an AD. Though coaching appears to be an entry point for many individuals aspiring to become ADs, it is no longer viewed as a prerequisite to becoming an AD (Lumpkin et al., 2015). Though the coaching route is common, the number of ADs with head coaching experience has decreased (Wong, 2014; Hardin et al., 2013).

Typically, the career path of an AD begins with education and progresses into gaining job experience in athletics via coaching or athletic administration (Lumpkin et al., 2015). Playing and coaching experience has been argued to be a form of human capital, as it provides administrators with industry knowledge and skills beyond what can be obtained through a degree program or job experience (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019).

Acosta and Carpenter (2014) argued that women who grew up in the post-Title IX era



may have better opportunities to obtain higher level administrative positions within intercollegiate athletics than their pre-Title IX counterparts because there are more women's athletic teams and participants than ever before. Additionally, there are far more opportunities for women who have grown up in the post-Title IX era to participate in sport compared to their pre-Title IX counterparts (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014).

Experience as a student-athlete as an important factor in becoming a Division I AD (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Hancock et al., 2017; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Katz et al., 2018; Lumpkin et al., 2015; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Samble et al., 2017; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Wong, 2014). Female athletes have unique qualifications for pursuing careers in sport management, and, therefore, should hold equal power in leadership of the sport industry (Free et al., 2012). The inspiration to support others may be the result of the familiarity that many senior-level female athletic administrators have as former student-athletes (Hanks et al., 2019). Athletic administrators from underrepresented groups have a unique perspective, as they understand what it feels like to exist in a system wherein there are few to no individuals in leadership positions that reflect their race or ethnicity (Hanks et al., 2019).

Female ADs are also more likely to have previous college coaching experience than their male counterparts (Lumpkin et al., 2015). Lumpkin et al. (2015) argued that the careers of women in intercollegiate athletics administration should begin with college coach followed by administrative experience that is applicable to the AD position. Likewise, Taylor and Hardin (2016) found intercollegiate coaching experience to be one of four avenues central to reaching maximum career mobility. Taitano and Basinger

(2016) investigated NCAA Division I female athletic directors' paths to leadership. Seven of the 8 women interviewed indicated that they participated in athletics at the collegiate level. In addition, 5 of the 8 participants had experience coaching at the collegiate level. The term "relative experience" is used to describe any experience prior to becoming an AD that participants felt contributed to their ability to obtain an NCAA Division I AD position (Taitano & Basinger, 2016, p. 42). Participants' relative experiences most commonly included experience as a student-athlete, collegiate coaching experience, fundraising experience, and a general understanding of intercollegiate athletics business (Taitano & Basinger, 2016). These findings support previous research indicating that the most common career paths of NCAA Division I ADs included prior playing and/or coaching experience (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Lumpkin et al., 2015; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Wong, 2014). Participants of Taitano & Basinger (2016) indicated that these experiences contributed significantly to their path to becoming an NCAA Division I AD. They felt that their experience in playing and coaching allowed them to relate on a personal level to the student-athletes and coaches with whom they worked. Samble et al. (2017) studied persistence and advancement of Division I female athletic administrators. Findings converged with Taitano & Basinger (2016) in that 17 of the 19 participants were former collegiate student-athletes. Additionally, all participants had previous coaching experience (Samble et al., 2017).

Acosta and Carpenter's (2014) longitudinal, national study on women in intercollegiate sport revealed trends of women working in intercollegiate athletics. They argued that males have more role models than their female counterparts in Division I

intercollegiate athletics administration. Thus, the presence of a female role model in a decision-making and leadership position (e.g., coach) could lead former student-athletes to pursue careers in intercollegiate athletics (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Although this research did not address the correlation between playing and/or coaching experience and pursuing a career in intercollegiate athletics, it did allude to the benefits that female student-athletes may gain as a result of being coached by a woman. Acosta & Carpenter (2014) suggested that female student-athletes coached by women (even in assistant coaching positions) are not only exposed to opportunities in sport management, they also have access to female role models. Swaton (2010) argued that female student-athletes may be deterred from pursuing careers in athletic administration or sport leadership due to a lack of female role models. Whereas, Taitano and Basinger (2016) indicated that Division I female ADs feel as though they have a platform to mentor female student-athletes that may have an interest in athletic administration. Through mentorship, they can provide a launching pad for future female ADs (Taitano & Basinger, 2016).

### ***Mentoring & Social Networks***

Social capital is accrued through social networks with peers, supervisors, and subordinates. In examining the limited number of women coaching men's intercollegiate athletics teams, Walker and Bopp (2010) found that compared to men, women do not have access to the social capital needed to obtain these opportunities. Additionally, the lack of social capital for women in athletics is a significant constraint to their ability to access coaching positions in men's athletics (Burton, 2015). Walker and Bopp (2010) concluded that a glass wall effect, the "good old boys" versus "good old girls" network,

gender influences on coaching intentions, issues of fit and overcompensation, and respect prevented women from advancing in coaching positions. Consequently, an environment of hegemonic masculinity is maintained within intercollegiate athletics (Hanks et al., 2019; Walker & Bopp, 2010; Price et al., 2015; Simpkins et al., 2019; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013).

Mentoring is defined as “a process in which a more experienced person (i.e., the mentor) serves as a role model, provides guidance and support to a developing novice (i.e., the protégé), and sponsors that individual’s career progress” (Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999, p. 25). Research indicates that women are not being mentored or educated enough on career opportunities in sport (Free et al., 2012; Hanks et al., 2019; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Samble et al., 2017; Taitano & Basinger, 2016). The interpersonal relationships developed through mentoring and networking assist women in managing their career experiences, expectations, and goals (Hancock & Hums, 2015). This is especially true for Women of Color who aspire to attain senior level positions within NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletic departments (Hanks et al., 2019). Taylor and Hardin (2016) suggested that women wishing to attain the coveted AD title at the Division I level should find a mentor who can assist with career advocacy and navigation and gain as much experience as possible in different areas of the department.

Katz et al. (2018) studied gendered leadership networks in the NCAA by analyzing affiliation networks of SWAs and ADs. Findings indicated that informal networks influence the underrepresentation of women in sport leadership positions (Katz et al., 2018). Informal networks can be defined as those that are unrelated to the formal

structures of authority (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993). For example, an “old boys’ club” can be viewed as an informal network within a sport organization. Athletics is a male dominated field; therefore, the formal and informal networks of women tend to be isolated based on gender (Katz et al., 2018; Schneider et al., 2010). When decision-makers inform their informal networks of job openings or best practices, they are inadvertently (and unknowingly) creating a gender discriminatory system (Katz et al., 2018). Katz and colleagues (2018) indicated that SWA networks are far less cohesive than AD networks and that institutions, conference offices and the NCAA must consider formal mentorship and networking programs that include women. For example, a formal mentorship program with an AD outside their host institution could provide SWAs with an opportunity to build their informal networks, thus increasing their chances of attaining an AD position (Katz et al., 2018). This could provide women in SWA positions the opportunity to obtain AD positions or enter the networks of other ADs, thus increasing their chances of attaining the position of athletic director (Katz et al., 2018).

Hancock et al. (2017) examined the impact of mentoring on career breakthroughs for women in intercollegiate athletics administration. Career breakthroughs have been defined as opportunities for new functional roles or project oversight (Mainiero, 1994). Participants included 51 senior-level administrators across all divisions of the NCAA. Findings indicated that mentoring was a critical in women’s career advancement or career breakthroughs. Participants indicated that having a mentor, both inside and outside of their respective athletic departments, was both desirable and important. Findings did not show any consensus on having a mentor of the same or opposite sex. Likewise, Hancock

and Hums (2016) found mentorship and networking valuable in the career development and advancement of women in Division I intercollegiate athletics administration.

Participants reported that opportunities to participate in a conference meeting or serve on a conference or NCAA committee allowed them to build their networks. By doing so, this established an avenue toward career development and advancement (Hancock & Hums, 2016). In a prior study, Hancock and Hums (2015) indicated that the interpersonal relationships developed through mentoring and networking assisted women in managing their career experiences, expectations, and goals. Participants in that study “described their networks as sources of camaraderie, commiseration, and change” (Hancock & Hums, 2015, p. 35).

Bower and Hums (2013) found that the lack of women in senior-level leadership roles within intercollegiate athletic administration indicates a lack of mentoring, which leads to a lack of upward mobility. Mentoring may lead to greater advancement opportunities due to the networking opportunity it provides for women in intercollegiate athletics administration (Bower & Hums, 2014). Walker and Bopp (2010) indicated that there is a perception of male-exclusive social networks within intercollegiate athletics administration. They concluded women are unable to establish a network in men’s sports because the “old boys’ club” is too exclusive and influential. Networking is especially important to women who lack access to the “good old boys club” (Katz et al., 2018; Walker & Bopp, 2010).

## **Self-Limiting Behaviors**

Along with human and social capital, self-limiting behaviors influence the underrepresentation and experiences of women in intercollegiate athletics administration (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007; Smith et al., 2019; Walker & Bopp, 2010). Self-limiting behaviors are the result of stereotypes associated with social constructs that limit the capacity of women in sport (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Examples of self-limiting behaviors exhibited by women in sport administration include failure to view oneself as adequate and not seeking advancement opportunities. Sartore and Cunningham (2007) argued that historical frameworks (e.g., homologous reproduction, human capital theory, and feminist theories) meant to offer an understanding of the underrepresentation of women in intercollegiate athletics administration leadership positions are missing a critical component. Though these theories assist in understanding the disproportionate numbers of men and women in executive positions within intercollegiate athletics administration, they “do not address the emotional and cognitive processes of women as they encounter disparate acceptance and treatment within the male-dominated sport domain” (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007, p. 245). Sartore and Cunningham’s (2007) framework described the ways in which traditional gender beliefs may inhibit women in sport organizations by inadvertently causing them to compare themselves with their male counterparts, thus resulting in self-limiting behaviors. Walker and Bopp (2010) suggested women believe that women coaching men’s teams are more concerned with being like a man and fitting in, than with portraying qualities of a woman and a coach. It has been suggested that women often do not have the desire to attain AD positions. Consequently,

they impose self-restricted career mobility for various reasons, including a commitment to their current institution, the desire to interact regularly with student-athletes and a lack of desire to take on additional responsibilities (Smith et al., 2019).

### **Intersectionality**

Hartzell and Dixon (2019) stated the need for a more comprehensive model to study women's career pathways and experiences in intercollegiate athletic administration. They argued that time and network considerations must also be examined to gain a more holistic view of the career experiences and trajectories of women in sport leadership. Hartzell and Dixon (2019) sought to extend the previously existing conceptualizations of women's experiences in sport leadership, and the choices women make in shaping their career paths. It is suggested that the underrepresentation and experiences of women in sport must be understood on multiple levels, and through varying contexts, as opposed to traditional avenues that do not consider the whole person (Burton, 2015; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019). Suggested avenues for future research include understanding the advancement of women in sport leadership positions in contexts beyond U.S. intercollegiate athletics, utilizing vignette methodology to study career and life choices, and examining women's career experiences retrospectively, for instance using a life history calendar. This more comprehensive model may be utilized to assist sport organizations in achieving positive benefits through diversity. Burton (2015) indicated that future research must continue to recognize that gender operates as an organizing principle within sport, but research should also consider the role of intersectionality, or other forms of identity (e.g., race, sexual orientation, class, ability) within sport research.



First introduced by Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality is defined as a framework for understanding the ways in which multiple identities (e.g., race, gender, class, political affiliation, sexual orientation, etc.) intersect to create unique experiences. People's lives and the organization of power in their society can be best understood through a multi-axis lens. By viewing the influence of every axis of social division present in one's life, rather than one axis, these phenomena can be best understood (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

In examining the experiences of women in athletics administration leadership roles, it is critical to recognize and understand the role of intersectionality. By utilizing intersectionality, the researcher is able to put experiences into context and analyze them both structurally and representationally (McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). Structural intersectionality refers to "the ways in which the location of Women of Color at the intersection of race and gender", makes their experiences different from other racial groups (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 1245). Representational intersectionality examines the effects of implicit and explicit representations of sexism and racism on the marginalization of and objectification of Women of Color (McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017).

### **The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation in Intercollegiate Athletics Administration**

Prior to intersectionality, research did not address the effects of simultaneous identities (e.g. gender, race, sexual orientation, etc.) intersecting to create unique experiences. In studying the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within intercollegiate athletics administration, it is critical to examine the ways in which the multiple identities intersect and influence participant experiences

(McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). Intersectionality has been utilized to study female leaders in higher education and sport administration in recent years. More specifically, the experiences of Black women and lesbian women in intercollegiate athletics administration have been addressed (Edwards et al., 2020; Hanks et al., 2019; Hannum et al., 2015; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Price et al., 2015; Simpkins et al., 2019; Walker & Melton, 2015).

### ***Race***

McDowell and Carter-Francique (2017) examined the intersection of African American and female identities with workplace experiences. Findings indicated that participants often experienced challenges to their gender and ethnicity in the workplace, combined with societal and occupational stereotypes. These challenges fell into one of five categories: 1) Occupational stereotyping and gender role conflict (judgments made about the women using occupational stereotypes), 2) Racial and gender stereotypes and gender threat (presence and effects of racial and gender stereotypes in the workplace), 3) Career challenges and obstacles (social identity related career obtainment constraints), 4) Criticism and scrutiny of qualifications and judgments (how the woman's qualifications were disproportionately criticized compared to previous athletic directors), and 5) Negotiating identity conflicts in the workplace (how the women resolve conflict between their identity and stereotype-based expectancies and judgments). Similarly, Hanks et al. (2019) studied the experiences of Black SWAs within NCAA Division I institutions. Findings indicated themes convergent with McDowell and Francique-Carter (2017): a) Athletics is a lifestyle, a holistic lifestyle, b) keen sense of awareness, c) pouring into

others, d) empowerment equals high satisfaction, e) education is leverage, f) men serve a central role in the sport experience, g) the landscape is improving at a “snail’s pace” h) forewarning and reality, and i) self-determination is a means of survival. Participants addressed the ways that working in intercollegiate athletics affects personal, marital, and professional relationships. Findings also indicated participants’ sense of awareness of the effects of hegemonic masculinity within intercollegiate athletics. As such, this may indicate that the historical presence of hegemonic masculinity in intercollegiate athletics has led some women away from pursuing careers in intercollegiate athletics administration (Whisenant et al., 2002; NCAA, 2019). Hanks et al. (2019) noted the (albeit very slow) shift toward more diverse applicant pools. This aligns with the NCAA’s 2018 annual Sport Sponsorship, Participation, and Demographics Search as well as the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport’s (TIDES) 2018 report on race and gender diversity, indicating an uptick in the hiring of Black women in senior-level leadership positions within intercollegiate athletics administration. Like McDowell and Carter-Francique (2017), participants of Hanks et al. (2019) indicated that implicit stereotyping influenced their thoughts and behaviors as well as the thoughts and behaviors of people interacting with them. Participants also indicated an appreciation for their presence in the department, as it provides Black student-athletes with support in an arena with few Black people in leadership positions. Participants reported feeling empowered and supported by their departments. This was especially true for those working at their alma maters. Participants of Hanks et al. (2019) did not feel they were denied decision-making opportunities, or their authority was challenged, as they were in

alternative research (Bower et al., 2015; Simpkins et al., 2019; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Rather, participants cited high levels of autonomy and authority in their current positions (Hanks et al., 2019). Hanks et al. (2019) suggested that male support influenced the career experiences of women in Division I intercollegiate athletics administration. Participants consistently noted the impact of encouragement, recruitment and job opportunities from male coaches, ADs, mentors, and colleagues. Findings of Hanks et al. (2019) support the hegemonic masculinity that is deeply rooted (and still present) within the landscape of intercollegiate athletics (Price et al., 2015; Simpkins et al., 2019). Finally, Hanks et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of career navigation for Black women aspiring to attain senior-level positions within intercollegiate athletics administration. This finding supports McDowell and Carter-Francique (2017) indicating that Black women must be prepared to navigate their careers in intercollegiate athletics administration so as to not be pigeonholed into positions that do not foster the skills necessary for career advancement.

Price et al. (2015) indicated the “color-blind” nature of intercollegiate athletics, which perpetuates Whiteness and creates a subtle hierarchy over underrepresented groups. Participants in Price et al. study consistently noted their experiences of color-blind racism and institutional practices which favor Whiteness and create disadvantages for underrepresented groups. However, participants also indicated that they do not see color. This color-blindness on the part of People of Color may also perpetuate racial hierarchies within intercollegiate athletics. Price et al. (2015) argued that if People of Color deny the existence of this hierarchy, the ability to change the culture of

intercollegiate athletics is threatened. Despite this finding, Black women in NCAA athletics administration positions notice that Women of Color are underrepresented in their departments and are taking steps to both mentor and recruit young Black women aspiring to work in intercollegiate athletics administration (Simpkins et al., 2019).

Edwards et al. (2020) studied the underrepresentation of Black women in intercollegiate athletics. Four themes emerged pertaining to what Black women need: 1) mentors who resemble them, 2) professional development, 3) networking community, and 4) more confidence (Edwards et al., 2020). Nine of the 10 participants exhibited perfectionistic sentiments, including the need to work harder than other races and genders to attain or keep the job. This indicates the notion that despite most of the women embodying very positive qualities, “minority stress” plays a critical role in the experiences of Black women in intercollegiate athletics administration (Edwards et al., 2020, p. 100). In examining the differences in career experiences of White and Black women in intercollegiate athletics administration, Hannum et al. (2015) indicated that Women of Color encounter a lack of opportunity and support much more than White women (75% versus 35%). Black participants experienced the benefits of having a role model at a much lower rate than did White women (7% versus 20%). This research also indicated that Women of Color are not being offered leadership opportunities at the same rate as White women, and Women of Color reported they experienced more scrutiny and criticism in their careers than White women (67% versus 20%) (Hannum et al., 2015, p. 70).

### *Sexual Orientation*

Walker and Melton (2015) addressed the intersection of race, gender, and sexual orientation in intercollegiate athletics administration. Four themes emerged including racially influenced experiences, managing lesbian-ness, organizational climate, and organizational outcomes. Racially influenced experiences encompassed two subthemes: the White lesbian experience and the racial minority lesbian experience. White participants generally did not consider race in their accounts of work experience. Sexuality was something participants felt “forced to manage every day,” as they omitted their sexuality altogether in the workplace (Walker & Melton, 2015, p. 262).

Fink et al. (2001) suggested that White, heterosexual males are the prototypical employee within sport organizations. Therefore, White males are afforded privileged status, while others are consigned to out-group status. Regardless of sexuality, men are afforded privilege because they are men (Walker & Melton, 2015). White women indicated feeling more included in the workplace than their Black lesbian counterparts and felt that their race brought a certain level of privilege (Walker & Melton, 2015). In comparison to White participants, Women of Color indicated having a more difficult time working in intercollegiate athletics due to their race (Walker & Melton, 2015). This may be attributed to the limited power that Black lesbians have historically had in sport organizations, as they are typically dominated by majority groups (Walker & Melton, 2015). Participants felt comfortable with their racial identities but concealed their sexual identities, as they felt it would not be accepted by White, male ADs. These findings

support previous research suggesting that racial identity is often easier to reveal in a sport context than sexual orientation (Melton & Cunningham, 2012b).

Black lesbians felt as though White lesbians could fit in in the workplace by concealing their sexuality; whereas, if they concealed their sexuality, it would not guarantee that they would feel the same sense of belonging in the workplace. Black lesbians also cited a feeling of “invisibility” within intercollegiate athletics administration, stating that many are “either very, very deep in the closet or they are unapologetically ‘out’ and content with having very little upward mobility” (Walker & Melton, 2015, p. 264). This suggests that going against gender norms may drastically reduce opportunities for career advancement within intercollegiate athletics administration. Findings also indicated that participants were diligent in managing the way/s in which their sexuality was portrayed in the workplace. Two subthemes of managing lesbian-ness were identified: signs of inclusion and identity management techniques. All participants of Walker & Melton (2015) indicated that lesbianism was not the norm, and therefore, not accepted in the workplace. Participants felt as though they had to get to know the organization/look for signs of inclusion prior to disclosing or withholding their sexual identities. These signs were typically in the form of organizational policies or language used by supervisors or coworkers. Regardless of race, participants felt that coming out would hinder their opportunities for advancement (Walker & Melton, 2015). Despite participants concealing their sexual identities in the workplace, findings indicated that opinions varied on how feminine to appear in the workplace. Some participants were overly concerned with appearing heterosexual, while

others did not make efforts to express femininity. Participants indicated that being out as student-athletes was much easier and widely accepted (particularly in women's basketball) and that they began to conceal their sexual identities when they transitioned into working in intercollegiate athletics administration. Athletic skills were the most influential in their success as student-athletes, therefore, they were more comfortable revealing their sexuality. Sexual orientation and appearance influence job stability and career advancement opportunities within intercollegiate athletics administration (Walker & Melton, 2015).

Participants of Walker & Melton (2015) discussed the organizational climates of their athletic departments, including workplace norms and inclusive organizational policies. For example, women working in departments that used inclusive language were more likely to feel comfortable in the workplace. These subtle signs of inclusion made the women feel more accepted and included. Participants also indicated that organizational policies that were inclusive in their language contributed to their level of comfort with disclosing their sexual orientation in the workplace. The use of inclusive language in department emails and invites fosters a sense of acceptance and inclusion for underrepresented groups (Walker & Melton, 2015). Similar research indicates that LGBTQIA+ employees deal with negative consequences associated with their minority status by leaning on supportive coworkers for identity affirmation and acceptance (Melton & Cunningham, 2014). Supportive coworkers assist in creating a more inclusive and "safe" work environment for LGBTQIA+ employees (Melton & Cunningham, 2014,



p. 29). Additionally, Ragins (2008) suggested that coworkers who are also close friends can serve as a source of support in the coming out process for LGBTQIA+ employees.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For the purposes of this research, the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics were examined through a feminist theory lens. Feminist theory seeks to analyze gender as a category of experience in society (Coakley & Dunning, 2000). In this case, gender was analyzed as a category of the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments. Feminist theories have been utilized in research on policy issues related to social justice for women in sport or to gain knowledge about oppressive situations (Cunningham, 2011a; Cunningham, 2011b; Fink et al., 2012; Hoffman, 2010; Walker & Melton, 2015; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013; Yiamouyannis, 2012). Hall (1996) argued that college sport diminishes women's experiences, provides men a popular culture site, and divides women along the lines of race, class, and sexuality. Despite this, sport, as an institution, has been resistant to feminism and remains conservative (Kamphoff, 2010). Intercollegiate athletics within the U.S. exaggerates differences amongst women and naturalizes masculinity (Hall, 1996). In other words, intercollegiate sport has traditionally provided a way for men to act, look, and communicate. Historically, this structure has been exclusionary, and women's issues and concerns regarded with a deaf ear (Hall, 1996).

Although feminist theories can take various forms (radical, social, liberal, womanism, post-structural), feminist literature reveals a common set of core principles,

including oppression, equality, power, and transformative social action (Plummer & Young, 2010). In examining the career experiences of women in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration leadership positions, data was viewed through both post-structuralist feminism and womanism perspectives. Feminist post-structuralism demonstrates the ways in which power is socially constructed through practices that disadvantage women (Hoffman, 2010). Post-structuralist feminism views men and women as part of the structure of binary oppositions and aims to deconstruct them. Further, post-structuralist feminism examines why women and feminism are constructed as threatening to the rationality and presence that is valued within Western humanist thought (Klages, 2012). Womanism shares many of the core principles of radical and liberal feminism.

Womanism was created by Black feminists “to examine the intersections of race, gender, and class oppression” (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 777). However, the focus of womanism is social transformation and the differing experiences among women of various classes and racial/ethnic groups (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). Womanism works to dismantle the hegemonic power structures that oppress marginalized groups. Furthermore, womanism reaches beyond race and gender to give voice and liberation to all oppressed populations (Johnson, 2016).

Intersectionality was utilized as a construct of feminist theories in conceptualizing the relationship between systems of oppression within sport (Edwards et al., 2020; Hanks et al., 2019; Hannum et al., 2015; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Price et al., 2015; Simpkins et al., 2019; Walker & Melton, 2015). Intersectionality can be defined as

a framework for understanding the ways in which multiple identities (e.g., race, gender, class, political affiliation, sexual orientation, etc.) intersect to create unique experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). Within feminist theory, “intersectionality has become the predominant way of conceptualizing the relation between systems of oppression which construct our multiple identities and our social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege” (Carastathis, 2014, p. 304). Thus, this research draws from feminist theory and intersectionality literature (Carastathis, 2014; Crenshaw, 1991; Klages, 2012; Kristeva et al., 1981) in understanding the influence of marginalized identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation) on one’s career experiences.

Carastathis (2014) cited four benefits of the usage of intersectionality within feminist research: simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility and inclusivity. Feminist theory indicates that women’s lives are constructed of multiple intersecting systems of oppression (Beal, 1970; Crenshaw, 1991; King, 1988). Therefore, because oppression is not seen as a singular entity, intersectionality offers an added layer of analysis. In examining the career experiences of women in intercollegiate athletics administration, the concept of intersectionality offers a method of viewing oppression from a standpoint that cannot be seen from the analysis of gender alone (Crenshaw, 1991).

Intersectionality, as opposed to singular approaches to viewing oppression, insists that multiple entities operate simultaneously and equally, to construct lived experiences. For example, because person is not a woman one day, and an African American the next day, and instead embodies both identities every day, one cannot view her experiences as a construct of a singular identity. Intersectionality also allows the researcher to manage

complexity (Carastathis, 2014). McCall (2005) distinguished three types of complexity that intersectionality attempts to grasp; intercategory, which focuses on the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups, intracategory, which studies complexity within social groups to reveal the lived experiences of their members, and anticategory, which aims to deconstruct analytical categories. By acknowledging intersectionality within research, the exploration of social relations within intercollegiate athletics administration may be better understood.

Crenshaw's (1991) concept of structural intersectionality aims to capture the phenomenological experiences of individuals who face multiple forms of oppression without fragmenting them through categorical exclusion. The irreducibility benefit of intersectionality is a corollary of simultaneity and complexity (Carastathis, 2014). Intersectionality theorists argue that, rather than reducing the phenomena of oppression to one category, oppression is created through multiple, decentered axes. Thus, the hallmark of intersectionality is addressing multiple oppressions (King, 1988). In her research on Black lesbians in the U.S., Bowleg (2008) stressed the importance of analyzing each structural inequality separately, as well as simultaneously, as this is a critical step in understanding intersectionality. Finally, intersectionality offers the benefit of inclusivity. Spelman (1988) argues that intersectionality can counteract hegemonic feminist theory by making often excluded female social experiences visible.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I provided a review of literature on women's experiences in leadership positions within intercollegiate athletics administration. The review of

literature was presented from a multi-level perspective (macro, meso, and micro). I also presented the role of intersectionality in women's experiences in intercollegiate athletics administration. Finally, I presented the theoretical framework for the research, including feminist theories and the utilization of intersectionality as a construct of those theories. In Chapter III, I present the methodology for the research. Study findings and the essence of experience are presented in Chapter IV. Chapter V includes conclusions and implications as well as recommendations for future research.

### **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this qualitative phenomenological study on the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics departments. The phenomenological approach aimed to allow for a deeper understanding of women's lived experiences of working within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics departments and allow participants to tell their stories (Gratton & Jones, 2004). The applicability of phenomenology, feminist approaches, and intersectionality are discussed in-depth within this chapter. The study design, including the methodology, participants, data collection, analysis, and ethical concerns are also presented in this chapter.

#### **Research Questions**

This qualitative study was guided by the following questions:

**RQ1:** What are the backgrounds of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments (sport participation, coaching, educational, career)?

**RQ2:** What are the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments?

**RQ3:** What resources/supports do women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments desire in their professional development?

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics departments. I utilized intersectionality as a construct of feminist theory, using

semi-structured interviews with women in Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments to learn about their experiences (Caratathis, 2014). Interviewing women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments sought to provide insight into their unique career experiences.

### **Study Design**

For the purposes of this research, I employed a phenomenological qualitative design. Qualitative research focuses on exploring and understanding the meaning individuals give to a social or human problem (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Within qualitative research, the researcher is interpreting the data and making meaning of it. Qualitative research is typically best when research involves social justice or community involvement (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Further, qualitative research is useful when the researcher does not know which variables to examine, or when it involves a group that has not been widely researched. Because the purpose of this research was to examine the shared career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 athletic departments, a qualitative phenomenological design was most appropriate, as it gets to the heart of the shared experience among participants (Berger, 2015).

Moustakas (1994) defines phenomenology as “knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experience” (p. 13). Phenomenological research focuses on the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants and typically involves conducting interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The phenomenological nature of this research allowed themes to emerge from the interviews and allowed participants to tell their stories (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Hermeneutic

phenomenology was utilized in this research, as it is concerned with the human experience as it is lived and is interpretive in nature (Laverty, 2003; Neubauer et al., 2019). Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on bringing details of life experiences to light that may otherwise be taken for granted. Phenomenology is concerned with uncovering meanings, while hermeneutics aims to interpret meanings (Backstrom & Sundin, 2007). Further, the aim of hermeneutic phenomenology is to create meaning and understanding of the experience (Chu & Taliaferro, 2019; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). An example of hermeneutic phenomenology is a participant describing a learning experience while doing a task or what he/she observes about others while working with them (Sloan & Bowe, 2013).

### **Participants**

I employed criterion sampling in this research. Criterion sampling was recommended because the qualitative design requires participation from individuals who have worked in similar environments (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The use of sampling criteria adds to the trustworthiness of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Robinson, 2014). In stating the sample size, criterion, and strategy for recruiting participants, transparency is achieved, thus increasing the trustworthiness of the research (Robinson, 2014). The criteria I used to select my participants included: a) female; b) currently holding Athletic Director (AD), Deputy Athletic Director (AD), Associate Athletic Director (AD), or Assistant Athletic Director (AD) position; c) employed within a Power 5 intercollegiate athletic department; and d) 30 years or older. I selected these criteria because I examined the experiences of senior-level female leaders within Power 5 athletic



departments. Thirty is suggested as a criterion age, as women age 30 or older have already encountered a range of “choice points” (O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005, p. 183) in occupational development (change of job, promotion and/or advancement) and life development (starting a family, moving closer to an aging parent, etc.).

Participants were identified using snowball, or network sampling. Snowball sampling is the most common method of purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Utilizing my professional network, a few key participants who met the selection criteria were identified. As I interviewed these key participants, I asked each of them to refer me to other participants. Once participants were identified (and prior to conducting interviews), I utilized athletic department websites and employee bios to verify that each participant met the participation criteria. The goal was to interview 8-10 participants for this research, and to reach a point of saturation. The researcher ceases collection of data when themes are saturated, or when gathering additional data no longer sparks new insights (Charmaz, 2014). Sampling should continue until a point of saturation or redundancy is reached (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

With regard to phenomenological research specifically, the point of saturation varies from study-to-study. Researchers suggest that saturation is reached when there is no new data, no new themes, no new coding and the study could be replicated (Guest et al., 2006). To check for saturation, I engaged in open-ended coding throughout the data collection process. I collected data to the point of sufficiency. Sufficiency is reached when individuals outside the sample can connect to the experiences of study participants (Seidman, 2006). I collected data via Zoom interviews. The population was women in

senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 athletic departments (see key terms). Ethical considerations were taken into account due to the limited number of individuals in the particular profession being examined. Pseudonyms were used for each participant and no identifiable information was used in reporting data (Bell & Newby, 1971; Wiles et al., 2008).

### **Sample**

Eight participants were interviewed for this study. *Table 1* outlines participant demographics, which represent participation requirements as described in Chapter III. The average age of the participants was 42.38 years. Four participants were between the ages of 35 and 40, two participants were between 41 and 45, one participant was between 46 and 50, and one participant was between 50 and 55 years of age. Racial identity of participants varied. Participants that identified as White represented five of eight participants, two participants identified as Black, and one participant identified as biracial. All eight participants had earned advanced degrees. The degrees earned by these women included masters degrees, MBAs (Master of Business Administration) and PhDs (Doctor of Philosophy). Four participants held master's degrees, two participants held MBAs, and two participants held PhDs. Total years in the profession varied amongst the eight participants interviewed. Two participants had 10-15 years of experience, four participants had 16-20 years of experience, and two participants had 20+ years of experience. Participants held a variety of titles within athletic departments, including Senior Associate Athletic Director, Associate Athletic Director, Deputy Athletic Director, and Athletic Director. Four of the eight participants had the title Senior Associate Athletic

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age ( <del>Ys</del> )	Race	Education	Years in Field	Title	Collegiate Athletic Experience
Kristin	50-55	White	PhD	20+	Senior Associate AD/SWA	N
Natasha	41-45	White	MBA	16-20	Senior Associate AD	Y (Division I)
Abigail	46-50	Biracial	Masters	20+	Senior Associate AD	N
Tracy	41-45	Black	PhD	16-20	Athletic Director	Y (Division I)
Jamie	35-40	Black	Masters	16-20	Deputy Athletic Director	Y (Division I)
Lori	35-40	White	Masters	16-20	Associate Athletic Director	Y (Division I)
Stephanie	35-40	White	Masters	16-20	Senior Associate Athletic Director	N
Ann	35-40	White	MBA	10-15	Deputy Athletic Director	Y (Division I)

*Note:* PhD – Doctor of Philosophy, MBA – Master of Business Administration, Masters – Master’s Degree

Director, one participant held the title Associate Athletic Director, two participants had the title Deputy Athletic Director, and one participant held the title Athletic Director. Five of the eight women participated in collegiate athletics. Two of the five Power 5 conferences are represented in the sample.

### **Data Collection**

I employed interviews for this study because the purpose of this research was to find common themes in the experiences of the participants [e.g., female senior-level athletic administrators within Power 5 athletic departments] (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). An interview is defined as a conversation for gathering information (Dexter, 1970; Easwaramoorthy & Zarinpoush, 2006). The purpose of an interview is to obtain special information and to “find out what is in and on someone else’s mind” (Patton, 2015, p. 426). Research interviews involve an interviewer, who coordinates the process of the conversation and asks questions, and an interviewee, who responds to those questions. Research interviews may be conducted by phone or face-to-face. There are three types of interviews used in qualitative research: highly structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I collected data via semi-structured interviews (via Zoom). I chose semi-structured because they allow participants to fully explain their career experiences. Semi-structured interviews also allow for clarification and follow up questions based on participant responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The open-ended format of the interview questions allowed new ideas to be brought up as a result of what participants said

regarding their feelings, perceptions or emotions about their career experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each interview spanned approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were audio and video recorded via Zoom and password protected. The aim of phenomenological research is to discover the essence of lived experiences (Patton, 2015). The interview protocol was developed with lived experiences in mind. For example, Question 3 (see Appendix A) asks participants about the resources and supports that have been critical to their careers. This question aims to understand the way/s in which resources and supports (e.g., mentors, professional networks, membership in organizations, etc.) affect the lived experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics departments. This question was included as previous research has highlighted the importance of these factors in women's experiences in intercollegiate athletic administration (Burton, 2015; Hancock & Hums, 2015; Hancock et al., 2017; Katz et al., 2018; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Following development of the interview protocol, I consulted with experts in the field to determine whether the interview questions could capture the essence of participants' career experiences. The protocol was edited based on the feedback received. Demographic information was collected prior to the interviews (see Appendix B).

### **Ethical Considerations/IRB**

Permission to conduct a study on human subjects was obtained through the University of Tennessee, Knoxville Institutional Review Board (IRB). Following IRB approval, I contacted members of my network to gain permission to contact prospective participants via email. To ensure participant protection, I considered my role in the study.

Given my background in intercollegiate athletics administration, I believed that my role as a professional colleague would assist in developing trust with the participants.

All participants were required to sign an informed consent form. Participants received this form via email and the consent was obtained and reviewed prior to each interview. Through informed consent, participants were made aware that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Furthermore, pseudonyms were utilized to protect the confidentiality of all participants (Bell & Newby, 1971; Wiles et al., 2008). I informed all participants that identifying information such as conference affiliation or state would not be linked to their participation. I also informed participants of how the data collected in this research would be stored and disseminated. Participant consent forms and interview transcripts were stored electronically on the primary investigator's university provided Microsoft One Drive. At the conclusion of the study, all data was deleted from the drive (e.g., interview recordings, consent forms, etc.).

### **Masking**

Due to the limited number of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics departments, masking was utilized as a method of protecting the identities of participants. Masking can be defined as a method of protecting participant identities in which their names and organizations are not revealed in the research (Walden Center for Research Quality, 2020). An example of this is changing the geographic location of the participants' institution (e.g., Power 5 institution in the Pacific Northwest region of the U.S. vs. Power 5 institution in the Southeast region of the U.S.).

This served to improve the trustworthiness of the research in that participants were more likely to be honest about their experiences knowing that their identities would not be revealed. In addition, participants were not subject to risks such as professional retaliation or perceptions of that threat, negative publicity, or loss of support (Walden Center for Research Quality, 2020).

### **Pilot Study**

To test the interview protocol (see Appendix A), I conducted a pilot study with two female senior-level leaders working in Power 5 athletic departments. Participants comprised of two women in senior-level leadership positions in a Power 5 athletic department. Interviews were conducted in person. Each interview was semi-structured, lasted approximately 60 minutes, and was transcribed and examined to identify common themes. After the interviews, I followed up with the participants to discuss the length of the interview, the questions, whether they understood what I was asking, and whether they felt the questions asked in the interview would answer the research questions. Appendix C outlines research questions in relation to data collection tools. A concept map was used to organize data into four primary themes that emerged from the interviews: *Mentorship, Opportunity, Respect, and Environment*. Various sub-themes also emerged, including support and female leadership (mentorship), growth and impact (opportunity), lack of respect from men, perceptions of women in athletics, hurt feelings, and not being enough (respect), and enjoyment, family, and the ever-changing landscape of college athletics (environment).

Through the process of conducting pilot interviews, I learned to pay attention to both verbal and non-verbal cues provided by participants, and to record follow up questions via field notes throughout each interview. I was initially apprehensive to deviate from the interview questions, as I wanted to be concrete. However, because I am using semi-structured interviews, it is okay to ask a follow-up question that might not be included in the interview protocol. In qualitative research, these follow-up questions are referred to as probes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Including open-ended questions allows the researcher to listen intently to the participant, which leads to greater analysis of the data and rich, thick description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I also learned that I should send the demographic form to participants prior to the interview to make the most of scheduled interview time. Additionally, through these pilot interviews, I discovered the importance of backing up interviews and using two recording devices for in-person interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

In examining the career experiences of women in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration leadership positions, data was viewed through both post-structuralist feminism and womanism perspectives. Post-structuralist feminism can be viewed as an extension of radical and liberal feminist thought, as it followed, but does not replace radical and liberal feminism (Kristeva, 1981). Post-structuralist feminism seeks to study the subjective positions of man and woman within language as opposed to examining the power inequities between man and woman (Klage, 2012).



Intersectionality was utilized as a construct of feminist theory in examining the career experiences of women in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration leadership positions. Utilizing intersectionality as a construct of feminist theory allowed me to capture the interwoven nature of systems of oppression. In analyzing data, it was critical to not only view participant career experiences from a feminist lens, but also view each structural inequality simultaneously and examine the ways in which these inequalities intersect to form lived experiences. This research examined the career experiences of multiple social groups within intercollegiate athletics administration. In utilizing intersectionality as a construct of feminist theory, the complexity of participant lived experiences was revealed. Further, in keeping multiple categories of oppression in play simultaneously, intersectionality captured the irreducibility of experience to a singular category. Intersectionality allowed for the career experiences to be viewed as a product of all participant identities simultaneously. Finally, utilizing intersectionality in this research allowed for inclusivity in the data analysis. Rather than viewing career experiences as a product of “womanism” only, the findings and implications are applicable to the various identities and institutional norms (elitism, ableism, power, etc.) that play a role in the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments.

Throughout the data analysis process, I engaged in the exploration of my own experiences to become aware of any prejudices, viewpoints, or assumptions regarding the phenomenon. This process is referred to as *epoché* (Moustakas, 1994). In qualitative research, researchers often engage in *epoché* or bracketing process prior to beginning a

study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). *Epoché* is a Greek word which means to refrain from judgment. Through this process, I set aside my understandings, judgments, and prior knowledge of the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments and focus solely on the phenomenon. The “setting aside” of my understandings, judgment, and knowledge is referred to as bracketing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The *epoché* and bracketing processes require transparency on the researcher’s part and allow the researcher to clear the space for interpretation of the data (Moustakas, 1994).

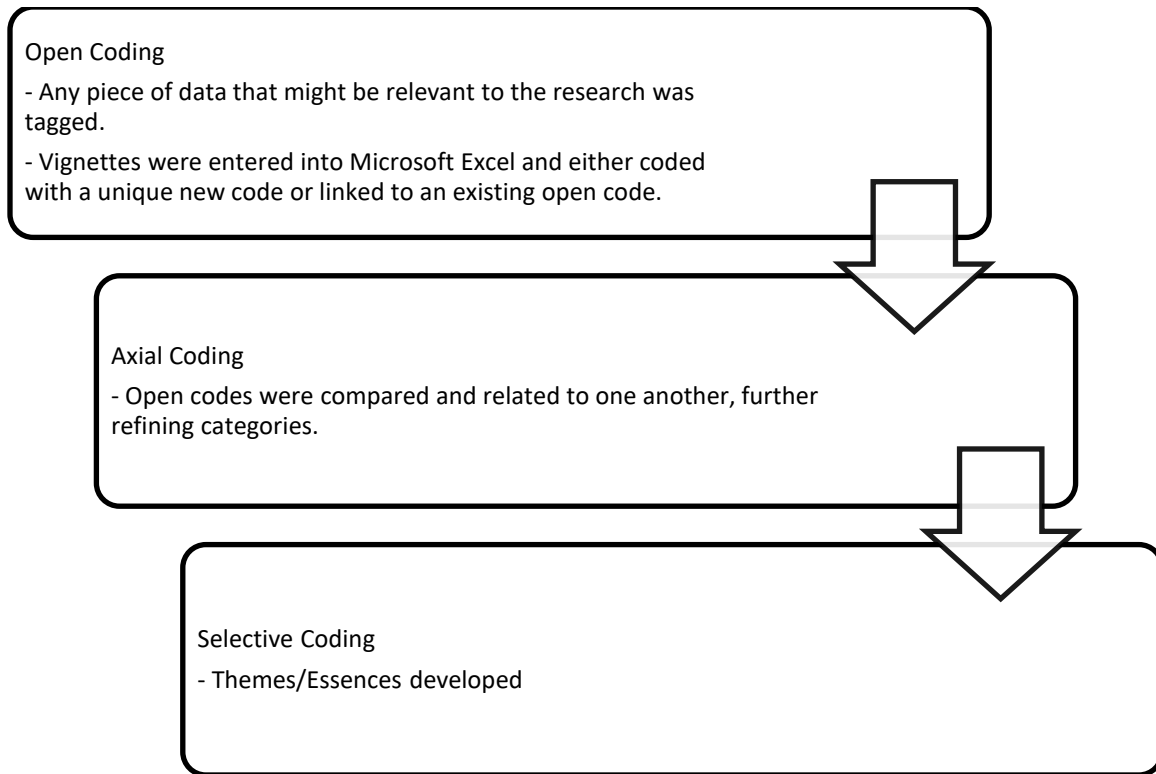
Qualitative data analysis is inductive in that it allows the researcher to build concepts, hypotheses, and theories from the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interpretive qualitative studies are those that focus on how people interpret their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interview responses were coded and categorized to aid with data reduction and to discover themes. Creswell (1997) describes a systematic process for coding data from a phenomenological inquiry. Through this systematic process, the researcher explores assumptions and pays close attention to participant descriptions of the experience and how it was experienced. Further, specific statements are analyzed and organized “into clusters of meaning that represent the phenomenon of interest” (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2016, p. 1375).

Each interview was transcribed via Zoom and reviewed for accuracy. As previously stated, I engaged in open-ended coding throughout the data collection process to check for saturation. During the open coding process, the researcher manually tagged any piece of data that might be relevant to the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A

Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was utilized to assist with the data organization and analysis. As the data collection process occurred, the researcher coded each new interview and analyzed and compared the data to previous interview data. This process is referred to as axial coding, wherein the researcher relates open codes to one another and further refines the categories (Charmaz, 2014).

In the next data analysis phase, selective coding was utilized to find themes or essences which emerged from the interviews. Throughout data collection, the researcher utilized the constant comparative method to further analyze the data. This process assisted the researcher in highlighting key points from the interviews. Essence refers to that which is common or universal (Husserl, 1931). Participant statements were examined to ensure that those included in the findings would bring details of participant life experiences to light that may otherwise be taken for granted. The structural-textural synthesis of interview data presented here represents the essence of participant experiences at a particular time and place from my vantage point as the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). *Figure I* includes a summary of the data analysis process for open, axial, and selective coding.

Phenomenological reduction was utilized to make sense of the phenomenon, or the essence of participants' lived experiences (Patton, 2015). Phenomenological reduction is a process in which the researcher continually returns to the findings to capture the inner structure or meaning of the experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).



*Figure 1.* Data Analysis Process

With epoché being the first step in viewing a phenomenon for what it is, phenomenological reduction allows the experience to become the focus (Moustakas, 1994). This requires the researcher to look and describe the experience from every angle, which adds to the understanding of a phenomenon. Phenomenological reduction “is not only a way of seeing but a way of listening with a conscious and deliberate intention of opening ourselves to phenomena as phenomena, in their own right, with their own textures and meanings” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 7). In addition, Moustakas (1994) states, “In correcting our conscious experience of things, we are often influenced by what other people say they see; we are encouraged to look again, from the perspective of another self” (p. 9). I utilized bracketing within the phenomenological reduction process. Each participant’s experience was “bracketed” and viewed singularly. This allowed me to continually view the phenomenon in a new way. Horizontalization was employed within the phenomenological reduction process. Through horizontalization, I treated every statement with equal value (Moustakas, 1994). Further, I deleted any repetitive or overlapping statements, leaving only the structural-textural meanings of the phenomenon. I then clustered the data around themes that describe the essence of the experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Next, I explored all possible meanings and divergent perspectives to “describe the essence of the phenomenon and its deep structure (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 220). This process is referred to as imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of imaginative variation

“is to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced; in other words,

the “how” that speaks to conditions that illuminate the “what” of experience. How did the experience of the phenomenon become what it is?” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 11).

I engaged in multiple steps of imaginative variation, including exploring all possible structural-textural meanings, recognizing themes, considering universal structures that may affect feelings regarding the experience, and searching for examples that illustrate the themes and descriptions of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, I synthesized the structural-textural descriptions to develop the essence of participant experiences of the phenomenon. Essence refers to that which is common or universal (Husserl, 1931). The essence of participant experiences are never completely exhausted (Moustakas, 1994). Following an exhaustive imaginative and reflective study of the phenomenon, my structural-textural synthesis represents the essence of participant experiences at a particular time and place from my vantage point as the researcher (Moustakas, 1994).

Hermeneutic phenomenology involves a two-stage interpretation process, wherein the participant attempts to make sense of their personal and social world, and the researcher aims to interpret the participant’s sense-making activity (Smith, 2004). This is referred to as a “double hermeneutic,” as it is a twofold process. Van Manen (1990) argues that phenomenological analysis is primarily a writing exercise, as the researcher must go through the process of writing and rewriting to derive meaning. Further, the aim of phenomenological analysis is to compose a story that captures a lived experience, wherein the reader feels as though she has experienced the phenomenon (Starks & Trinidad, 2016).

## **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the trustworthiness of this research, I utilized multiple methods, including member checking, saturation, peer review/peer debriefing, and reflexivity. Member checking is a method of determining the accuracy of the final report. Through member checking, the researcher solicits feedback from participants to determine whether they feel the emerging themes are accurate (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants had an opportunity to review the findings of this research to ensure the essence of their experience was accurately represented. Research suggests that member checking is the best method of identifying researcher biases and potential misinterpretations of data (Maxwell, 2013). Although the researcher may use different words to describe participant experiences, participants should be able to recognize their experiences through the researcher's writing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further, through member checking, participants may suggest minor edits to better capture their experiences. Throughout the process of conducting this research, I engaged in peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing is a process in which the researcher calls upon a peer that is not involved in the research to ensure that the researcher is thinking about all aspects of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the process of conducting the pilot study, I engaged in peer debriefing with multiple colleagues. In those dialogues, we discussed the research process, the participants, and the interview protocol. Reflexivity is defined as "awareness of the influence the researcher has on what is being studied and, simultaneously, of how the research process affects the researcher. It is both a state of mind and a set of actions." (Probst & Berenson, 2014, p. 814).

Reflexivity is critical in ensuring the trustworthiness of this research given my career path as the researcher. An honest self-reflection is critical in fully understanding my biases and relationship to the study.

### **Reflexivity**

Over the course of 13 years, I served as an athletic academic advisor at three Division I institutions. Nine of those 13 years were spent in a Power 5 athletic department in the southeastern United States, working primarily with football, women's soccer and women's tennis. Prior to my most recent position, I spent four years working at two small Division I institutions in the Northeast. Due to my career path, I have a very close relationship with the topic that I am studying. Although I was not in a senior-level position at a Power 5 institution, I aspire to advance in college athletics administration. My experiences in intercollegiate athletics administration did not necessarily happen as I envisioned. Therefore, the obstacles and barriers that I have experienced in my career, specifically at a Power 5 institution, may influence the way I interpret the data from this research. Having been a female athletic administrator within a Power 5 athletic department, I do have some biases entering this research. First and foremost, my experience working in a Power 5 athletic department was very different than working at small Division I institutions. Despite putting everything I had into my career, I do not feel as though I was afforded the opportunities that I anticipated at the Power 5 level. Much of my career opportunity has come from my work in small, Division I athletic departments. Further, each of the career opportunities I have been afforded have come from female supervisors.



I addressed this potential bias through continuous self-reflection via field notes and reflexive journaling throughout the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Field notes may contain reflections on what worked or did not work in gaining access to participants, remaining ethical and data collection. I utilized reflexive journaling to address potential bias. The reflexive journal may be used to record research logistics, rationales for methodological decisions, and/or personal reflections of my own values, interests and insights (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I restated the research questions and purpose statement for this research. I presented the methodology and methods that I utilized in this research and provided an explanation of the research methodology as well as the rationale for selecting a qualitative approach. I discussed details of the semi-structured interview, data collection and analysis, and presented the ethical considerations of this research. Finally, I provided the data analysis methods as well as sections on trustworthiness and researcher reflexivity. Chapter IV presents study findings, including four themes and 11 sub-themes. Additionally, the essence of participant experiences is described in Chapter IV.

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments. This study was guided by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the backgrounds of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments (sport participation, coaching, educational, career)?

**RQ2:** What are the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments?

**RQ3:** What resources/supports do women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments desire in their professional development?

The following chapter presents the findings that emerged from eight semi-structured interviews with women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments. Demographic information was also collected and analyzed. A summary of demographic information was presented in Chapter III. Data analysis resulted in the emergence of four overarching themes. Each theme contains multiple sub-themes, which were utilized to assist in presenting and discussing the findings. *Table 2* presents the four themes and sub-themes that emerged from data collection and analysis.

In this chapter, a presentation of four themes and 11 sub-themes are presented and supported by participant statements regarding their career experiences as senior-level leaders within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments (textural descriptions) and the contexts in which these experiences occurred (structural descriptions).

Table 2

*Themes and Sub-Themes Related to the Career Experience of Women in Senior-Level Leadership Positions within Power 5 Intercollegiate Athletic Departments*

Themes	Sub-Themes
Pathway to Senior-Level Leadership	Non-Aspirational Path Increasing the Pathway
Support and Mentorship	Female Mentors Family Support Mentoring Others
Stereotypes	Traditional Female Roles Workplace Dress Lack of Inclusion Gendered Experiences
Intersectional Constraints	Race Sexual Orientation

The chapter concludes with a presentation of the overall essence of participants' experiences. This essence was derived from the researcher's structural-textural synthesis of participants' experiences at a particular time and place from the researcher's vantage point (Moustakas, 1994).

Using feminist theory and intersectionality as frameworks during data analysis, four themes emerged: (a) pathway to senior-level leadership; (b) support and mentorship; (c) stereotypes; and (d) intersectional constraints. Pathway to leadership includes information on participants' paths to leadership and avenues by which women can continue to make strides and/or be more visible in senior-level administration positions within the Power 5 athletic conferences. Support and mentorship refers to the relationships these women have established with others that have benefited them throughout their careers, and the way/s in which they have been able to provide mentorship to others. Stereotypes includes the stereotypes and gendered experiences that women working in intercollegiate athletics administration face and how these women have been able to navigate them. Intersectional constraints refers to the challenges (or lack thereof) that these women have encountered throughout their careers based on their race and/or sexual orientation.

### **Pathway to Senior-Level Leadership**

Participants took varying paths to senior-level leadership within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration. Their titles varied, including athletic director (AD), senior associate athletic director, associate athletic director, and deputy athletic director. An athletic director (AD) is defined as an administrator that oversees the athletic

department and the programs within it. Regardless of title, all participants discussed their path toward senior-level leadership. Participant pathways toward senior-level leadership within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration were primarily incidental (i.e., they did not aspire to work in intercollegiate athletics administration from a young age). For example, Lori shared her reasons for choosing intercollegiate athletics administration as a career. She articulated, “It was just the visible path in front of me.” As a former student-athlete, she felt connected to athletics and perceived athletics as a natural career path, “It was something that I felt comfortable doing, and I felt I could add value to an experience that I was really close to, and that I enjoyed.” Despite this, participants described working their way “up the ladder” to arrive in their current positions. Further, the advancement of these women was heavily influenced by the support and mentorship of others throughout their careers.

Once participants were on the pathway to leadership within intercollegiate athletics administration, they became much more intentional about their career goals and invested more time into themselves professionally. The two sub-themes of the pathway to senior-level leadership were non-aspirational path and increasing the pathway. These sub-themes capture common experiences amongst participants along their pathways to senior-level leadership.

### ***Non-Aspirational Path***

Though each participant had a different path toward senior-level leadership within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration, one commonality was that early career opportunities in intercollegiate athletics administration were largely unplanned. Some

participants entered intercollegiate athletics administration as a result of injuries suffered while competing in intercollegiate athletics. These injuries ultimately led to their retirement from competitive athletics. Others entered due to potential eligibility issues. For example, NCAA student-athletes must declare their majors prior to their seventh semester of full-time enrollment. One participant explained how this potential eligibility issue led her to intercollegiate athletics administration. Ann had no idea she would get into college athletics as a career and joked about the ease of school and lack of true interest outside of competing in intercollegiate athletics, “I just knew that I was playing ball and honestly, even the school piece was never really that hard for me, but it was just something that I didn’t enjoy. I just wanted to hang out with my friends and play ball.” Her real interest in college athletics as a career path was sparked by a potential eligibility issue during her junior year:

We were about to load a bus to play a game and my academic advisor came out and said NCAA rules say you’re not eligible if you don’t declare your major. We kind of just threw something out there and it was basically dealing with people and sales and athletics, so I went into marketing. Then I kind of gravitated toward more of the sports case studies in my classes, so I got a little idea that I was kind of interested in that. And then my AD asked if I wanted to be a graduate assistant (GA) in the sports marketing department. So, I was a GA for them. I learned a lot. Then I got my MBA and was offered my first full-time position and then just kind of worked my way up.

Ultimately, this experience guided her toward intercollegiate athletics administration.

Had she not been close to ineligibility, she may not have been introduced to intercollegiate athletics administration. Ann recalled her experience of “falling” into the profession and “clawing” her way up:

I kind of fell into it. I know that sounds spoiled because there are so many people who are working their butts off to break into this amazing field, and I think our

profession is so unique and so special. I don't have a crazy story of clawing my way in, but I've clawed my way up for sure. I didn't have to do that getting into it. So, I'm very blessed in that way. I didn't necessarily know what collegiate athletics was other than being a student-athlete. I'm very blessed and fortunate for my AD. He (the athletic director) gave me a shot and then the rest kind of fit.

Natasha also competed in intercollegiate athletics but did not realize it was a career path until after she completed her eligibility. She joked about taking online quizzes to gauge her career interests:

I remember taking those online quizzes that ask you questions about yourself. One of the options was high school athletic director. I think I knew there was a business of sport, but I never really thought about it. So that kind of got me thinking.

Once she knew this was an option, she met with her AD:

I went and met with my athletic director and she challenged me to look at how other ADs got to where they were. In doing that, I decided I wanted to go back to grad school. So, she connected me with another AD and he actually had a huge hand in me getting into school and getting a graduate assistantship. When I got this job, I knew I wanted to be an AD, but I had no idea how to get there. No one realizes there are like 60 areas of the department that you have to figure out how to navigate. I kind of have always just taken it a step at a time.

Granted, Stephanie did not compete in intercollegiate athletics, she had a similar experience in not knowing what she wanted to do and thinking about what she enjoyed in life. This led her toward intercollegiate athletics administration:

Honestly, when I was in college trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I was an English major at the time and just started to think about what I enjoy in life and what could I see myself doing. And I just thought being around sports is so fun. I'm not athletic at all, but just something about the camaraderie and the memories, whether they're good or bad, you know when your team wins or loses. So, I just started googling jobs and sports and realized an English degree probably wasn't going to do me any good, so I switched majors because I thought I was going to go the agent route. But then I realized I can make a career out of working in college athletics, and the rest has been history.

Stephanie's initiative to define what she enjoyed, and research intercollegiate athletic administration may have given her an advantage over other individuals who may have had an interest in the industry but did not take the time to research what it entailed. Furthermore, Stephanie had the intuition to know that an English degree would not translate to athletics. Her change of major was likely instrumental in her path toward intercollegiate athletics administration.

Likewise, Jamie did not aspire to become a senior-level administrator within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics. After suffering multiple injuries while competing in college athletics, she decided to retire from her sport. As a result, she was able to get the behind the scenes look at college athletics by working with her coaching and event management staff. Through this experience, her interest in the industry grew:

I had a very injury plagued career, which led into my athletics background. In order to keep your scholarship, you had to intern in the athletic department or somewhere along your professional field of interest, as well as work a certain number of event hours per semester. I actually interned with my coaching staff, along with our event management staff. And that's how I kind of got the behind the scenes look of athletics and kind of intrigued me a little bit.

Tracy had a similar experience in that she competed in intercollegiate athletics and suffered multiple injuries. In this case, injuries and red shirts allowed her to complete a graduate degree while she was sidelined. In United States intercollegiate athletics, a red shirt refers to when a college athlete is held out of competition for a year to extend their athletic eligibility (merriam-webster.com, n.d.). Tracy recalled this experience, "I was a student-athlete. I had several surgeries. And then had the opportunity to go to graduate school and begin working in the department." Like other participants, Tracy did not know that going into college athletics as a career was an option, "I didn't know that was an



option going into college. I thought I would go home and teach, because I didn't really understand athletic administration or other areas."

Participants often described their experiences of entering intercollegiate athletics administration as "by accident" or "in a backdoor way." Lori explained her route toward working in intercollegiate athletics and how it seemed to be the perfect fit based on her background, "I interned in our athletic communications department and found that my journalism skills, coupled with my love of sports really made it a nice marriage and an excitement for me professionally."

Kristin entered intercollegiate athletics administration from a different profession. She was not a student-athlete and never aspired to work in collegiate athletics. Similar to other participants, she did not intentionally pursue a career path in intercollegiate athletics, "I started in athletics probably 20 years ago, and it was kind of in a backdoor way." Kristin was working in a different profession when she was approached about an opportunity in intercollegiate athletics. In this case, she had transferrable skills that would lend themselves well to this opportunity, "Because I had been doing something similar, I was asked to interview. That's kind of my entry point." Having worked in athletics for more than two decades, Kristin never had aspirations to work in college athletics, "If you would have asked me 20 years ago, I would have told you that I want to be an executive director of a nonprofit organization."

In summary, despite varying backgrounds, all participants entered intercollegiate athletics administration without aspiring to work in the industry. Each participant had a different story that led them into the field. Regardless of the route to college athletics

administration, participants shared commonalities with regard to their experiences. These commonalities are outlined in the following sections.

### ***Increasing the Pathway***

Though all of the participants are in senior-level administrative positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments, each indicated that more can be done to increase the pathway for women in senior-level roles in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration. Intercollegiate athletics has historically maintained a culture of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity exists wherein one form of masculinity (e.g., exclusively heterosexual and physically dominant) are overemphasized, resulting in the overpowering of all other forms of masculinity and subordinating women (Connell, 1995). In spite of intercollegiate athletics administration making strides with regard to gender diversity in leadership, there is additional work that must be done for athletics administration to be considered inclusive. One commonality shared by participants was the need for men in the industry to be more inclusive of women. Jamie shared the need for men in intercollegiate athletics administration to be more open to expanding their networks and vision of intercollegiate athletics:

The answer, in some ways, resides with the men and the men being more open to expanding their networks and their vision and their foresight. We know that people hire who and what they know. And so, if the men are the ones right now, in those leadership positions, in decision making positions, they have to be the ones to help open those doors. It has to start with men being open to it, because right now they're not.

While the culture surrounding women in intercollegiate athletics administration has improved in recent years, this indicates that there is still a ways to go. Men are instrumental in helping women obtain senior-level positions. This applies to hiring and

interviewing practices, as well as diversity and inclusion training within athletic departments. Participants also discussed the need for men to be more accepting of women in senior-level roles to increase diversity of thought. In this case, diversity of thought refers to the varying viewpoints held by men and women. Stephanie stated that women are needed in these positions to bring varying perspectives and opinions:

I think it's critically important that we have advocates, in men, in our industry. You know, that they value different perspectives and opinions. Just approaches and philosophies on how business is done. I don't even think that we as women in administration realize that there are people who are looking up to us, or who are noticing us.

Similarly, Tracy discussed the need to migrate away from the culture of hegemonic masculinity in intercollegiate athletics and alluded to the sensitivity and savviness that women can bring to senior-level roles within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration, especially AD roles:

We will get to a point where that professionalized AD, one with a doctorate, one with some relevant experience is what people are going to be looking for. We're getting away from that "give the job to the White dude, who's in the Hall of Fame, who people just love, right?" That's gonna change. And as it should, but that's when you're going to see more women in these jobs, because there's going to be another level of sensitivity needed to do these jobs. And it won't just be competence. It'll be sensitivity. It'll be savviness. And the consumers, the students, will expect more. They will be the ones that drive us, they will bring us to a different state.

Tracy is referring to the "good old boys" network that has historically been prevalent within intercollegiate athletics. She understands the history of intercollegiate athletics and feels that there will soon be a migration away from hiring the White hall of famer who the fans want to see leading the department. Instead, individuals from different demographics will have an

opportunity. She feels that the athletic director position requires a level of sensitivity and savviness that a woman possesses. Finally, she presumes that there will be a shift from fan driven hiring to consumer driven hiring, meaning that the student-athletes will begin to drive this change.

All participants have had male mentors throughout their careers who have been extremely supportive. In addition to male athletics administrators being more open to expanding their networks to include more women, Tracy indicated that women need to be placed in front of board members, ADs, university presidents and chancellors. This “visibility” would allow talented women to build their professional networks, which may serve to provide women with more career advancement opportunities. In addition, women need to be in positions that lead to senior-level administration. Whether or not there are talented women out there that can do these jobs is not the issue. The issue lies in the lack of visibility many women have to building their networks and obtaining career advancement opportunities. Tracy attested to the need for increased visibility of women:

I think that we have to get in front of presidents and ADs. And we have to show them that there's some extremely talented women out there. Who can be the face of programs and deserve opportunities. Board members need to know, presidents and chancellors need to know. On the flip side of that is that we need to make sure that there continues to be qualified women in the pipeline. I'm always careful with that, because I don't want to give the impression that the reason why there aren't more women in roles is because there aren't enough women that are ready to do it. That's not true. There's just not enough people that are willing to hire women.

This indicates the need for people in decision-making positions within intercollegiate athletics administration (i.e., men) to be open to expanding their networks and allowing women an opportunity to fill senior-level roles. Natasha also referred to a lack of women

in “pipeline” positions and the need for athletic departments to make a commitment to diversity:<sup>1</sup>

I think there needs to be a commitment to diversifying different groups in the department. When I look at the department, there are lots of women. There are lots of women in leadership roles at the senior level, but at the mid-management level, there are not women there.

In addition to increasing the number of women in “pipeline” positions, participants indicated that decision-makers, whether male or female, must be intentional about hiring individuals from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Ann indicated that this diversification is needed at the university level:

I think it starts with those who are in those roles right now. We need to be cognizant of it, and regardless of whether I have experienced (discrimination) or not, I still think it's our jobs to be cognizant that it is out there. And then to be cognizant of it in our hiring practices, and in our committee formations. In who we bring to meetings. I think that we need to have a diverse group that we surround ourselves with. And I don't just mean women, I mean different backgrounds, religions, different ethnicities. I think that's huge for just growing athletic departments in general.

While Ann has not personally experienced discrimination in her career, she is aware that to move forward, leaders within intercollegiate athletics administration must be inclusive in their practices. The shift toward more inclusive practices is not limited to women; rather, these practices should be inclusive of all underrepresented groups within intercollegiate athletics administration.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “pipeline” positions is used, as there is literature to support this. See Chapter 2 for an in-depth discussion.

Participants discussed both the career experiences that are needed to prepare women for senior-level roles within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration, as well as programs or services that might allow more women to pursue these opportunities. Natasha indicated the need for women to be educated on what is needed to attain senior-level positions. For instance, sport oversight, revenue generation, etc.:

I feel like there needs to be more education or an understanding of the mid-manager level, like units. If they want to be an AD or they want to be a senior-level employee. What do people look for in an AD? What do you need? Do you have sport oversight? Is revenue something you need to be focused on? I don't know if there's awareness about that.

Natasha is referring to the lack of knowledge that women have about careers in the sports industry. Mentorship programs may serve to educate women on the various opportunities available in sport as well as the background and education needed to pursue those opportunities. Participants also indicated that women need sport supervision experience in order to prepare for senior-level roles, particularly with revenue-generating sports such as football or men's basketball. Women have to be just as bold as their male counterparts in asking for what they need to advance in intercollegiate athletics administration. Tracy told her athletic director specifically that she needed to be named the sport supervisor for football, as this would eventually affect her credibility:

I said to our athletic director, I need you to formally name me sport supervisor for football. Because I know that from a career standpoint, I need that. I have to be able to say I did that and did it for real, and it's on the resume. Or it's gonna be a credibility thing for me.

She indicated that sport supervision matters even more for non-traditional candidates, especially Women of Color. This is because Women of Color are often held to a higher standard and evaluated more strictly compared to their White counterparts. Kristin stated

that women, as a whole, need more experience with sport supervision, specifically football. She indicated that her (male) AD named the (female) Deputy AD sport supervisor for football, because “he knows that needs to happen.” This indicates that some men in decision-making positions understand the importance of providing women with sport supervision opportunities. Sport supervision has been integral in these women obtaining senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic administration. Both Natasha and Lori mentioned they were able to gain sport supervision experience in their positions. Lori spoke about her role in sport administration and supervision, “Part of my role is sport administration and overseeing all of our sport administrators and then having oversight of our softball and field hockey programs as well.”

The experience participants have within sport administration indicates this is a key factor in the career advancement of women in senior-level leadership positions within the Power 5 conferences. Combined with sport supervision experience, participants indicated the need for those in decision-making positions to do more than review candidates’ resumes. At times, candidates are pre-judged and not given a chance because hiring managers make decisions based on their resumes or other factors such as gender, skin color, etc. Rather than only reviewing a resume, hiring managers could go a step further in “vetting” candidates. For example, speaking to previous employers could provide more insight on a candidate. Tracy indicated the need for athletic departments and hiring committees to be more open when reviewing candidates:

Experience is arbitrary. We just make stuff up all the time. So, it's like you want to be an AD? You've got to be external? I know external people that don't know

anything about students and don't understand the landscape. If you say to them, "Are you ready for name, image, and likeness? Do you understand compliance, those are things that get you fired. Have you ever hired a coach?" This stuff that's getting ADs fired, is not the external piece. It's the stuff on the internal side. But yet, the external people are the ones who get the job.

She elaborated:

The top fundraiser, so he can lead a department that supports young people? Because if that's all he can do, that is not enough to do this job. Having said that, you can have someone who's only working academics and understands APR and how to support young people but doesn't know that this is also a business. We look at people's resumes or we look at their skin, we look at their gender, whatever, and we decide what they know. And that makes no sense because I've met some fundraisers who are dynamic, and they love kids, and they're so good. And then I've met people in academics that wouldn't want to lead anything.

Although a candidate may appear to be a "great fit on paper," they may not possess the qualities necessary for success. Tracy indicated that experience is subjective. Therefore, vetting candidates may better serve institutions in the hiring process.

Participants shared numerous recommendations for increasing the pathway for women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 athletic departments. These included decision-makers (e.g., men) being open to both hiring women and expanding their networks, increased diversity in hiring practices, more visibility for women, and sport supervision (specifically with football and men's basketball). Collectively, these ideas and programs may serve to increase the pathway for women in intercollegiate athletics administration.

### **Support & Mentorship**

Support and mentorship emerged as a critical theme to both entering intercollegiate athletics administration as well as obtaining career advancement opportunities. Participants expressed gratitude for the individuals who have been placed



on their paths toward leadership. This included mentors and family members who have served as sources of support throughout their careers. Stephanie commented on the importance of mentor support:

My boss just took me under her wing and believed in me. She was so gracious with her time and introducing me to other people in the industry and because she was my first true boss in the industry, and she was a female, I remember having conversations about how females can be competitive with one another and compare and try to hold each other back, but she was like I hope one day I'm working for you.

This is evidence of the importance of a devoted mentor in providing support and guidance to women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic administration. Mentorship was not limited to individuals working in intercollegiate athletics administration. Participants also spoke of family members that have provided mentorship throughout their careers. They indicated that they would not be where they are professionally had it not been for the mentorship received throughout their careers. Jamie recounted the importance of having the right people placed on the path to career success, “It has to start and end with people. I’m not sitting in the chair that I’m in without having some people who have been strategically placed along my path, who have helped me.”

Participants discussed strong relationships with both men and women in the field. They indicated that female mentors were important; however, it did not seem that participants had a preference for female or male mentors. Kristin acknowledged the importance of having a personal and professional “Board of Directors.” These are individuals that can be utilized to discuss professional challenges, new ideas, etc. More importantly, they are individuals that are always there to talk. Abigail recognized her

professional board of directors and how they have helped her throughout her career, “You have to have different people who come in and out of your life who help get you to where you are. Colleagues are a good sounding board. That’s what’s helped me.”

### ***Female Mentors***

Although participants indicated having both male and female mentors, they spoke about the power of having strong female mentors, in particular. Lori recalled the impact that her college coach had on her, both from a personal and professional standpoint. Her coach not only introduced her to the industry, but also served as a strong female presence for her:

My basketball coach came into my life and she's just been somebody who I've leaned on like a mother. It's just been a really awesome resource. From that perspective, whose opinion I deeply value.

Lori’s statement indicates that some female student-athletes are, in fact, able to enter intercollegiate athletics administration and access career opportunities through the presence and mentorship of female coaches and athletic administrators. Though participants did not aspire to work in intercollegiate athletics administration while they were student-athletes, their experiences with mentors at their universities allowed them to learn about the industry and develop an interest in intercollegiate athletics administration. Had it not been for the impact these individuals had on participant lives, they may not have pursued intercollegiate athletics administration as a career path. Lori described the impact of a female mentor on her career path, “Our SWA has knocked down doors for me to create the department. She's paved the way for a lot of good things for me.”

Participants expressed gratitude for the women that came before them and the path that was paved for them as a result. Their descriptions of experiences with female mentors throughout their careers indicates that the number of female role models for women in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration is increasing and the Power 5 is making strides with regard to placing women in leadership roles within athletics administration.

### ***Family Support***

Participants stated that family members have been able to support them throughout their careers and, in some cases, serve as mentors to them, despite working in different industries. They had close relationships with family members that have helped them along the path toward senior-level leadership in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration. Kristin indicated that her family has been a strong support system to her throughout her career, especially in decision-making, “I always like to touch home when I’m going to make a decision. And even if my family can’t understand, my mom and dad can understand what it means. They’re my base.” Likewise, Natasha indicated the impact of family support both financially and emotionally for individuals working in intercollegiate athletics administration, “I’ve leaned heavily on family. Because they don’t pay you shit. When you’re in sports, you definitely need financial help from family. And emotionally. My dad has been a mentor.” This not only eludes to the importance of family for those working in intercollegiate athletics administration, but to the financial aspect of the industry that many people do not consider. Though high-profile coaches earn high salaries; often times, administrators earn considerably less. Granted family

members may not work in intercollegiate athletics, participants indicated that they can still be great supports in terms of providing a different perspective. Tracy described her husband's impact on her career and the way in which his leadership has assisted her:

My husband doesn't work in athletics. He doesn't work in higher education. He's a very, very smart businessman. So, I pick his brain all the time. And I think it's a good example that you can learn from people who are not in your industry. If you're a good leader, you're a good leader no matter where you work, or what you do.

This may indicate that the perspective and leadership of mentors outside of intercollegiate athletics administration may be equally as important as the perspectives of mentors in the field. Nonetheless, participants indicated that mentors have played an integral role in their careers.

### ***Mentoring Others***

In addition to the presence of mentors in their own lives, participants expressed the importance of mentoring others. They spoke about giving back to others because their mentors have poured into them throughout their careers. Stephanie indicated the obligation she feels to mentor others in the field, especially women, as she started her career working for a woman who was a mentor to her:

Because of the way my career started and reporting to a female, I feel like I've intentionally tried to help other people, be it student interns, other staff members...to have a seat at the table. Whether they have any knowledge or expertise in what's being decided, but just to be exposed to different pieces of our world in our business. Mainly because that's how I was helped along.

Likewise, Ann described making time for others (men and women), whether it was a quick conversation, an interview, etc. in an effort to uplift others in the industry. While she does not feel she has been subjected to any gender-related hindrances in her career,

she understands that they exist, and wants to help other women (and men) in any way she can:

I think just doing any interview that I can. I've never told a student or a GA or a coordinator or an assistant or director or senior-level person, you know, for any sort of conversation. I mean that's what I love to do too, because I've had people in front of me who have pulled me up, some men, some women. But because of that, I do feel like it's a responsibility of all of us that are fortunate to be in a position to lift others up, especially women. Again, it didn't happen like that for me; where I felt it hindered me in any way. But I do know that it's out there and I do know that people experience it firsthand. So, if I can help with that in any way and give any sort of advice, then great, that's even better.

Participants have had positive mentors and have been afforded career opportunities as a result of these relationships. Therefore, they also feel an obligation to give back and mentor others. This has the potential to increase the pathway for women in senior-level leadership positions not only within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments, but across intercollegiate athletics. Through mentoring others, the participants have been able to provide an avenue for other women (and men) toward career development and advancement.

### **Stereotypes**

Feelings of being stereotyped were expressed by participants. This was not expressed as a constant feeling; however, they indicated feeling stereotyped and/or not included at points in their careers. Tracy acknowledged the presence of stereotypes within intercollegiate athletic administration, "I don't always think about this, but certainly being a woman in a male-dominated profession, and then being a Woman of Color in a male-dominated profession. It's sometimes like having to combat stereotypes." For example, she indicated that a former colleague implied that she could not become a leader in

athletics administration because of her race and gender. The sub-themes presented below outline the way/s in which the intersection of participant identities has affected their career experiences.

### ***Traditional Female Roles***

Stereotypes about traditional female roles were often acknowledged. These traditional female roles ranged from women assuming administrative tasks, to the assumption that a man is in charge, to workplace attire. Abigail indicated that a female mentor told her early in her career to avoid responsibilities that are traditionally viewed as “female jobs:”

I remember a mentor telling me don't be the one who makes coffee in the morning. Don't always volunteer to take notes. I will make coffee when I drink it or if I'm the first one in the office. But when I worked in football, it seemed like they (the football coaches) would drink all the coffee, but no one would make it.

Taking notes or making coffee may appear to be easy tasks; however, when it continually comes up, it becomes bothersome. This was a commonality amongst participants. Lori expressed frustration about women being asked to take notes or take on administrative tasks more so than their male counterparts, “I also hate that women are typically always the note takers and we're always the ones that have to do the administrative assistant type of work, which is really annoying.”

The participants expressed frustrations about being asked to take on roles that are traditionally “female” roles. They have, in some ways, stepped away from these traditional roles. Despite trying to be helpful early in her career by taking on some of these administrative tasks, Tracy joked about how she no longer says yes to these tasks:

I remember earlier in my career, realizing that, you know, you go into a conference room, or you go into a meeting, and somebody needs a copy made, and they'll kind of turn to you. Or lunch needs to be ordered. And they'll turn to you when you're sitting with your peers, and you're the only woman. Early in my career, I just wanted to help. And then once I realized, I just stopped. They're gonna be turned all the way around until they get busy. I'm not doing that.

Rather than being frustrated by being asked to do administrative tasks or intimidated by the men with whom they have worked, in many cases, these women have taken a stand.

Natasha described asserting herself in meetings, and the stereotypes that men often do not encounter:

I definitely feel like there are times when I'm in a meeting and I have to assert myself because I'm getting "mansplaining" or I'm getting asked to take notes. And that has been something that definitely, males don't have to deal with.

While she joked about "mansplaining," this happens in every industry and it is real. She also recalled being asked to take notes at a video shoot. In this case, the person who asked her to take notes stereotyped her as a subordinate because she was the only woman in the room. In reality, all of the men in that room reported to her:

I was the most senior person in a room and there was a video shoot, and people that all reported to me were in there (all men) and the video director came up to me and asked me if I would take notes. I said "No, actually all these people in here report to me so you can ask one of the guys in the room."

Despite the assumption that males are in charge persists within intercollegiate athletics administration, the hope is that this assumption will become less prevalent as more women assume leadership roles. Participants also discussed feeling as though they are being "put in a box" with regard to job titles typically held by women. Lori stated that others often assume she wants to be in a certain role based on her gender:

There's a preconceived assumption that you would want to go into a more traditionally feminine role within the athletic department like academic advising

or athletic training or something like that. I'm strongly not interested, or qualified for those roles, so like stop trying to put me in the box.

Even though some women are comfortable with traditionally female roles such as academic advising or athletic training, other women are taking on roles traditionally associated with males, such as marketing, sports information, athletics development, etc. Further, the women taking on roles traditionally held by men do not want to be “put in the box” of traditional female roles. Rather, they intend to be the women that break the mold.

### ***Workplace Dress***

Along with stereotypes about traditional “female” roles, participants discussed stereotypes on workplace fashion. Most notably the difference between what a woman is expected to wear in the workplace compared to a man. Natasha commented on the double standard that exists regarding male and female workplace fashion, “I think the part that is super unfair, especially in sport is like I'm not supposed to wear a polo and pants to work, but you want me to dress up?” She is eluding to how men can wear a polo and be dressed for work; whereas, women often have to put more effort into workplace fashion. In addition, there seems to be an unsaid “softer connotation” to women’s workplace fashion. For example, Natasha recounted an experience early in her career where she was asked to convince a coach of something while wearing a skirt:

I remember when I first started, I had to have a meeting. They wanted me to convince a coach to do something (and these were my friends to be fair, so it didn't make me feel uncomfortable), but looking back they were like wear a skirt that day.



In this case, Natasha did not feel uncomfortable, as these were her friends attempting to convince her to dress a certain way to convince a coach of something. However, it is an experience that she recalls vividly. She also pointed out the double standard that exists between what women see on television and how they may be expected to dress in the workplace:

When I first started in the field, I was like rhinestone heels, super cute tight skirt, in shape. So, I looked good. I remember my boss said something to the female that oversaw me. He said can you please have a conversation with her. But it's not fair when you look at all the advertisements on TV like that's what they're wearing to work, that's what *Sex in the City* has on, that's what *Vogue* is wearing to work. Not athletics.

Natasha was emulating what she saw on television and thought nothing of her outfit.

However, she was stereotyped for what she was wearing. This stereotype is definitely not exclusive to intercollegiate athletics administration; it exists in every industry.

Nonetheless, it is a stereotype that women have to be much more cognizant of than their male counterparts.

### ***Lack of Inclusion***

In addition to confronting stereotypes, participants indicated feeling excluded at times throughout their careers. In many instances this exclusion may have been unintentional. However, it was a commonality amongst participants. Tracy recalled an experience in which she felt excluded and it was apparent that she was not meant to be included in the conversation.

Being the only woman, I'll go to these meetings, and anytime there's a new AD that joins, there's this big joke about, "Now we're going to give you the rules on when you wear a tie. We only wear ties on certain days." That conversation isn't meant to include me.

Tracy also felt excluded by certain norms that exist within intercollegiate athletics administration. In this case, the conversation centered on wearing ties. This indicates the need for men to be more open to expanding their networks and allowing women to have a seat at the table. She also commented on a “wives luncheon” that excluded her husband:

When you go to meetings, they have a wives luncheon. While we are in the meetings, is my husband supposed to go to that? What is he going to do? Or what happens the first time we hire a male AD who is gay? Where's his husband supposed to go?

Despite efforts to create a more inclusive environment for women in intercollegiate athletics administration, this indicates that the “good old boys” network is still very much intact. While Tracy is a strong woman and can see past comments such as these, they are made often, and, as Tracy stated, they are simply not meant to include women. Even if these comments are considered “harmless,” they exclude women and further perpetuate the hegemonic masculinity that exists within intercollegiate athletics.

Women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments often experience stereotypes related to traditional female roles and workplace dress. They also experienced feelings of exclusion. Despite these experiences, the participants have not been deterred from pursuing career advancement opportunities. They have persisted on the path toward senior-level leadership and an instrumental role in increasing the pathway for other women in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration. In addition to stereotypes about traditional female roles and workplace dress, participants recalled gendered experiences they have encountered throughout their careers.

## ***Gendered Experiences***

Participants did not feel that gender has been a hindrance to their career paths. However, they did share challenges they have encountered because of gender. These challenges included reminders of being the only woman in the room, a feeling of not being heard, the assumption that a woman cannot oversee a male sport such as football or men's basketball, feeling as though women have something to prove, and assumptions involving relationships with male student-athletes.

Jamie discussed the constant reminder of being one of few women in the room, "Every day, when every meeting that you're in, you're either the only or one of very few that are at the table or in the room. It's a constant reminder." This is an everyday occurrence for women in senior-level roles within intercollegiate athletics administration. Despite this, participants did not change their way of operating to "fit in" with the men. Rather, they continued to do their jobs the way they saw fit. Lori detailed an experience in which she was asked to separate herself from the other women in meetings, "I was told that I could not sit next to another female in our senior staff meetings, because it looks bad. And it looked like the females were all together for some reason." Lori indicated that she was "annoyed" by this request. This could be interpreted as a strategic move; however, it could also be meaningless. The reasoning behind this request was not explicitly stated.

Kristin reported feeling as if an alarm went off every time a woman walked into the football complex and noticed her gender as a result of that, "Like I would walk into the building and be like, did the siren go off? Because there's a woman here. You notice

your gender. I didn't find it as a barrier.” Despite experiencing these emotions, Kristin did not view this experience as a hindrance to her career. Rather, she took it as a normal part of the job. Similarly, Lori discussed an experience that made her hyper-aware of identifying as a woman, “....When I say something and then a man says it next and everyone hears what the man says.” She went on to indicate that she has gotten used to this happening at her current institution for some time.

Another gendered experience that women face in intercollegiate athletics administration is the perception that women cannot oversee men’s sports. Women often have to fight to oversee men’s revenue sports, particularly football and basketball. Tracy acknowledged this challenge, “There's a lot of assumptions people will make. It can be more about being a woman, like you didn't play football. So how are you going to oversee it?” Sport oversight is largely about managing coaches, budgets, programs, etc. Therefore, having played a particular sport or not is irrelevant when it comes to sport supervision. Just as women often have to fight to gain sport supervision experience with men’s sports, female athletics administrators often feel they have something to prove. Natasha described having a chip on her shoulder and wanting to prove her skills. She indicated that she did not want to be the girl to take on what some might view as trivial tasks. Rather, she wanted to do the important tasks such as revenue generation to prove herself:

I didn't want to be the girl wearing the headset. Or the one who picked the song at that game. I remember feeling like I needed to prove myself from a financial standpoint. Like okay, No! I'm gonna prove you wrong and show you the data with revenue numbers, and that we're making a difference financially for the department because I felt like that made it seem more legit.

Despite women assuming more senior-level administrative roles within intercollegiate athletics, this indicates that women continue to feel like “underdogs” in intercollegiate athletic administration. Natasha felt as though she had to prove that she was making a difference in the department to feel more “legit.” In reality, she was making a difference for the department just by doing her job.

In addition to discussing how gender has created challenges, the participants, shared ways their gender has helped advance their careers. For example, working with male student-athletes is sometimes easier for women. Kristin indicated that she had to figure out how to use her gender to her advantage in working with male student-athletes, “I know I was the academic counselor for men's basketball because they wanted a woman, right. So, I had to figure out how to use that.” Women are often recruited to work with male student-athletes for the “softer” touch that they bring to the industry. Additionally, because many male student-athletes were raised by women, it may be assumed that they would respect and listen to women more than they would a man. In this case, Kristin knew that she was chosen for this position because of her gender and found a way to use it to her advantage. She was able to work with her student-athletes in a way that men would have been able to work with them. In turn, she was able to get more effort out of her students. Abigail expanded on this notion indicating her gender helped her when working with male student-athletes. They often responded better to women:

I think it's also a benefit. That I could get more out of my (football) students because I'm a woman. Most of them have been raised by strong women, a grandma, mom, aunt, big sister, whomever. So, I used that to my advantage when I wanted to love on them a little bit, high five them, or if I had to dog cuss them

out, sometimes it was okay. Because they had been [loved on and cussed out] before by a woman. Where it would be very different if my male colleague would go after him that way.

Abigail was able to give her male student-athletes “tough love,” which helped her to successfully do her job. This worked for her because of how her students were raised. Furthermore, she viewed her gender as an advantage in some aspects of her job, particularly in working with football student-athletes.

Participants also recalled instances of coaches apologizing for foul language. They discussed coaches swearing in meetings or during pre/post game speeches and stopping to apologize to the women in the room. Often times, coaches are attempting to be respectful by apologizing. However, this could make women feel marginalized. Ann recalled a situation in which a head coach stopped a post-game speech to apologize for his language:

In the middle of a post-game locker room speech, or a dugout speech, when a head coach is cursing up a storm and it's an awesome speech, and he stops and says, “Oh shoot sorry, excuse me.” It kind of ruins the momentum. I guess you could see that as being a gentleman, but to me I'm just like come on let's move past that.

Women are sometimes called out in these situations and it may be more comfortable to move past it. While women often want to be recognized for what they “bring to the table” as women, participants stated that they would rather not be called out in these situations.

Participants described instances of feeling as if their voices were unheard because of their gender. Stephanie acknowledged feeling as if her voice was not as important as a man's voice. Despite this, she indicated that she feels these experiences have prepared her throughout her career:

Knowing that there are times when my voice isn't perceived as being important, that sense of not being valued or appreciated, has helped me in the way I prepare for situations where I know that I might be the only female in the room.

In spite of feeling like her voice was not important at times, Stephanie has grown professionally as a result of these experiences. Participants indicated that they often feel the need to be the most prepared and knowledgeable person in the room. Stephanie elaborated that although she does not feel that these situations have hindered her professionally, they are frustrating. In these cases, she has turned to mentors for support:

Being a female in this industry has been a challenge. I don't believe that it's hurt me directly. Obviously, I've been happy with my career and where it's gone. But there have definitely been times when I know my voice hasn't been heard or has been cast aside. And those moments are incredibly, incredibly frustrating. But usually that's when I lean into people that I trust and that are on my team just to help with perspective and not get worked up about it.

Natasha also recalled instances of feeling as if her voice was not heard:

I think in meetings when you're the only woman, it stands out. I think women sometimes tend to lean a certain way when it comes to an issue, and I would look at it differently. So, I'm sure there were times where I just wished that there was an ally in the room that would understand. Or maybe when you're sticking up for women, then your voice isn't recognized as strongly because you're doing it because you're a feminist. Like they discount what you have to say sometimes about supporting women or something beyond unfair to women. Because you're a woman.

She is referring to the diverse perspectives that women can bring to intercollegiate athletics administration. Furthermore, having an ally with whom to share those perspectives would be ideal. Natasha is also alluding to the assumption that a woman speaking up for “women’s issues” must be a feminist.

Similar to Stephanie and Natasha, Abigail discussed feeling as if she had to work harder than others early in her career and that she did not have a voice:

Earlier in my career, I looked younger than I was, and I think people didn't really take me seriously. I [am] a Woman of Color, and then you know, I think I'm attractive, so I think those are the things that I had to work harder to prove that I deserved a seat at the table. Or feeling that I didn't have a voice.

Because Abigail was a young, attractive, Woman of Color, she felt she had to work harder than her peers to be taken seriously. She also felt as though she had to prove to others that she deserved to be there. This indicates that gender poses challenges for women in intercollegiate athletics administration. These challenges include, but are not limited to reminders of being the only woman in the room, a feeling of not being heard, the assumption that a woman cannot oversee a male sport such as football or men's basketball, feeling as though women have something to prove, and assumptions involving relationships with male student-athletes. Despite encountering gender-related challenges, and feeling frustrated at times, participants persisted in intercollegiate athletics administration and are pleased with their careers.

### **Intersectional Constraints**

The final theme that emerged was intersectional constraints. Participants alluded to situations in which they felt challenged because of their race and/or sexual orientation. These challenges were viewed as part of participants' unique pathways toward senior-level leadership in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration. Tracy indicated that while athletics teams may appear to be diverse, intercollegiate athletics (in some ways) still lags behind other industries:

Athletics is ahead in some ways. You look at diversity for example. You could take the average basketball team, and you could say, look how these people from different parts of the country, different races, different demographics, they come together with a common goal. So, in some ways, I think we have great lessons that we could teach the broader



institutions about diversity and work and diversity of thought and data. But in some ways, we're still behind and I think it's a really interesting message that we send.

### ***Race***

Racial challenges emerged as a sub-theme. Participants commented on the way/s in which race has impacted their experiences as senior-level leaders within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration. Participants reported feeling as if they needed to be the most knowledgeable and prepared person in the room. Jamie explained, “Being the most knowledgeable and prepared person in the room, even when you're sitting at a table full of you know, let's be honest, old White men.” She elaborated that as a Black woman, “You got to think differently, you got to think bigger.” This feeling of needing to be the most knowledgeable and prepared person in the room may relate to minority stress. Minority stress refers to the “additional stress that members of marginalized groups experience because of the prejudice and discrimination they face” (Center for Community Practice, n.d.). Similarly, Tracy commented on the way/s in which institutions and conferences are attempting to support Black ADs. Because the needs differ for White and Black ADs, the way/s in which these individuals are supported is critical to their success:

We were having a conversation today about ways to support Black senior-level administrators. And they said because we know that your margin of error is smaller, you're held to a higher standard, the way you're evaluated is more rigid. So, one of the things we talked about is how we support you. And that's just real talk right there.

Tracy's statement is similar to Jamie expressing the need to think differently, think bigger, and be the most prepared and knowledgeable person in the room. Race has created an added level of pressure for these women in that their margin of error is smaller

than their counterparts'. In addition, Tracy commented on the notion that Black women are more limited in intercollegiate athletics than their White counterparts. She recalled an experience early in her career in which she was limited by a colleague:

When I was finishing up my master's program, an administrator at the time said to me that as a Black woman in sports, coaching might really be the best avenue. Because he said you'll probably have more opportunity. And he said, you can make a great living as an assistant coach, and his words were, you may never get the chance to be a head coach. That's probably a reach. But it's interesting, because he limited me, right? I knew enough to know that didn't sound right. He never said to me, you can be an administrator. He certainly never said you can be an AD.

In spite of limits others may have tried to place on the participants, they have broken barriers and created a pathway for other women to enter intercollegiate athletics administration at the Power 5 level. Tracy commented on the what it takes to remain at the table and continue to create a pathway for other individuals from underrepresented groups:

You are a disrupter to established systems and structures. You can't be overly sensitive, or you won't stay at the table. You have to figure out how to help people understand that the world is changing. It comes up in some form or fashion every day.

Often times, the most diverse individuals in any room are the ones that are talking about diversity. Tracy discussed the internal battle she feels about being the only one to speak up. While she feels a responsibility to advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion, she believes that everyone can speak up for diversity:

One challenge that I've had is I feel very committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion. But I don't always want to feel the pressure of having to be the administrator at the table that raises those issues. And sometimes it's an internal battle because it's near and dear to me. And I think that because I have a seat at the table, I have to make sure that I'm advocating. I get tired of being the only one. And I think that's sometimes when you're the only one of anything at the

table you sort of have to carry the torch. So, I find that sometimes, like around diversity issues, everybody will kind of look at you. In some ways, it's a privilege to have a seat at the table. But it's a challenge too. I think we can all make the case for diversity.

Some participants have experienced race-related challenges throughout their careers.

They indicated the need to be the most knowledgeable and prepared people in the room, which may relate to minority stress. This need to be the most knowledgeable and prepared person in the room may be a result of the higher standards that Black women are expected to uphold. Participants also spoke about support for Black administrators. Finally, professional limits that have been placed upon participants as a result of their race were discussed.

### ***Sexual Orientation***

One participant commented on the challenges she has faced professionally as a result of her sexual orientation. Despite this, I felt it was critical to discuss this sub-theme. Ann divulged her sexual orientation during the interview, and how that has impacted her career experiences in intercollegiate athletics administration. Overall, she was grateful for her professional experiences and opportunities; however, she did discuss an instance in which she felt she was not afforded an advancement opportunity due to her sexual orientation. Furthermore, Ann stated how she feels about being out to her colleagues and not wanting her sexual orientation to be the reason she is chosen for a professional role:

I'll be honest with you. I'm gay but I don't think I hide that. My bosses know. They've always known, but I don't run around waving that everywhere. I also don't want that to ever be where I'm used to check a box.

Ultimately, Ann feels very supported by colleagues in her current department. It was apparent that she feels comfortable and can be her authentic self with her coworkers. Conversely, she went on to describe an experience in which she was not afforded a professional advancement opportunity due to her sexual orientation. Though she will never know for sure whether or not this lack of opportunity was due to her sexual orientation, she believes this was the reason:

I want to be as honest as possible because again it's not something that I hide. There was definitely a hurtful experience at a previous institution where it got back to me that the AD said something to the effect of you know her lifestyle is going to be what damns her. She's not going to go places because of that (her sexual orientation). And like I have tattoos, I cover them. I kept my sleeves and pants on, like I wasn't showcasing them, but I guess he knew that, or he knew I had tattoos or heard that I was gay, so he made that comment.

Ann elaborated:

There were promises made to me under his tenure that did not happen, and I do believe that's why. But again, I can't prove it and I'm not gonna hang on to it. I don't need him and obviously it's water under the bridge now. So that is one instance, where yes, I can say my classification, as part of a marginalized group did hinder me from getting a promotion. But had that not happened, I would not have wanted to leave, and I wouldn't [have found] my current institution, which was a huge blessing. So that's kind of how I see it.

Ann views this situation as a blessing, as it allowed her to leave that institution and find her current institution, where she is professionally happy. Had it not been for this experience, she would not be where she is today. She views her experiences positively. However, it is critical that this, and other diversity issues, are illuminated in an effort to inform athletic departments, institutions, conference offices and governing bodies. As Jamie stated, "It's gotten better (the culture of intercollegiate athletics administration). But there's certainly a long way to go."

## **Essence of the Career Experience of Women in Senior-Level Leadership Positions within Power 5 Intercollegiate Athletics Administration**

Husserl (1931) stated that the essence refers to that which is common or universal. The essence of the career experience of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration is captured below in a description which emerged from a synthesis of participant statements. This essence was derived from the integration of “the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essence of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). In this case, textural descriptions (participant statements regarding their career experiences as female senior-level leaders within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments) were synthesized with structural descriptions (the contexts in which participant experiences occurred).

The path to entering intercollegiate athletics administration was largely non-aspirational. Participants became more intentional about senior-leadership roles upon gaining further experience in intercollegiate athletics administration. With the support and mentorship of others, participants were driven toward leadership roles. While the path toward leadership was not without challenges, the essence of experience indicated that participants overcame these challenges to career advancement opportunities and pave a pathway for other women in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration.

Although participants discussed instances of being stereotyped, excluded, and/or facing challenges throughout their careers, they believe that women have made strides at senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration.

Furthermore, participants are unequivocally grateful for their careers and for the opportunities they have been afforded thus far. They encouraged other women to both become involved in intercollegiate athletic administration as well as to pursue leadership roles, as they believe that they have a “pretty cool opportunity” and, although they did not build the institution of intercollegiate athletics, they get to contribute to it on a daily basis.

### **Summary**

The major findings of this study were presented in Chapter IV. Four themes and 11 sub-themes emerged from participant interviews on their career experiences. The four themes were “pathway to senior-level leadership,” “support and mentorship,” “stereotypes,” and “intersectional constraints.” These themes and their sub-themes captured the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics departments.

The essence of participant experiences revealed that although their paths into intercollegiate athletics administration were non-aspirational, they were able to advance into senior-level roles with the support and mentorship of others, and, later became more intentional about advancing in the profession. Despite encountering challenges throughout their careers, the women are extremely grateful for their positions and for the role they have in increasing the pathway for other women in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration.

Chapter V includes a summary and discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions, theoretical framework, and literature review. Conclusions and implications are presented in Chapter V, as are recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION and IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this critical qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments. This study was guided by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the backgrounds of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments (sport participation, coaching, educational, career)?

**RQ2:** What are the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments?

**RQ3:** What resources/supports do women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments desire in their professional development?

Data analysis from semi-structured interviews revealed the essence of the participants' experiences. Four themes emerged, including *pathway to senior-level leadership, mentorship and support, stereotypes, and intersectional constraints*. Table 3 outlines thematic findings in relation to the research questions.

### Research Question 1

The first research question aimed to address the backgrounds of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments. Four themes emerged in relation to this research question: non-aspirational path to senior-level leadership, educational background, professional experience, and sport supervision.



Table 3

*Thematic Findings in Relation to Research Questions*

Research Questions	Thematic Findings
<b>RQ1:</b> What are the backgrounds of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments?	Non-Aspirational Path Educational Background Professional Experience Sport Supervision
<b>RQ 2:</b> What are the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments?	Stereotypes Diversity Challenges Gratitude
<b>RQ3:</b> What resources/supports do you feel women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments desire in their professional development?	Mentorship Support from Male Colleagues Industry Knowledge

## **Non-Aspirational Path to Senior-Level Leadership**

Findings indicated that participants did not aspire to pursue careers in intercollegiate athletics administration. Rather, participants found their pathways to intercollegiate athletics administration as a result of injuries sustained competing in intercollegiate athletics, potential eligibility issues, or via indirect avenues. Similarly, previous research has indicated that achieving the AD position is not a career goal for women working in intercollegiate athletics administration (Grappendorf et al., 2004; Sagas & Cunningham, 2004; Smith et al., 2019). Though many participants were former student-athletes, they did not necessarily have knowledge of intercollegiate athletics administration as a career path. Instead, they gained this knowledge as a result of their athletic careers ending and exploring career options. The non-student-athlete participants found their paths toward intercollegiate athletics administration largely as a result of exploring personal interests.

Despite experience as a collegiate student-athlete being cited as a prerequisite to senior-level leadership within intercollegiate athletics administration (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Hancock et al., 2017; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Katz et al., 2018; Lumpkin et al., 2015; Samble et al., 2017; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Wong, 2014), findings indicate that both former student-athletes and non-student-athletes can advance to senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration. This may indicate a shift away from characteristics historically viewed as prerequisites to senior-level leadership within intercollegiate athletics administration, particularly at the Power 5 level.

## **Educational Background**

Previous research indicates that educational background is critical in the career advancement of women working in Division I intercollegiate athletics administration (Bower et al., 2015; Hanks et al., 2019; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Lumpkin et al., 2015; Wong, 2014). Research also shows that women are achieving higher educational levels than their male counterparts (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019). Consistent with Wong (2014), which showed that nearly 90% of all ADs hired since 2009 have advanced degrees, all study participants held advanced degrees. Degree levels ranged from master's degrees (i.e., MBAs) to PhDs. The findings of this study indicate that educational background is a critical factor in the career advancement of women in senior-level athletics administration positions. Conversely, Hartzell and Dixon (2019) found that higher levels of education do not necessarily equate to career advancement for women in intercollegiate athletics administration.

## **Professional Experience**

Taylor and Hardin (2016) found that the career advancement of women in intercollegiate athletics administration is dependent on gaining relevant experience. Amongst participants of this research, the average number of years in intercollegiate athletics administration was 17.75 years. This finding is consistent with Hancock (2012), which indicated that the average career length amongst female assistant and associate ADs at NCAA Division I institutions was 16 years. Further, previous literature suggests that job experience is far more critical than education in the career advancement of

women working in Division I intercollegiate athletics administration (Bower et al., 2015; Hancock & Hums; 2015; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Taylor & Hardin, 2016).

Participants cited the need to develop skill sets associated with those in positions on the path to AD (e.g., budgeting, fundraising, sport supervision). This is consistent with previous research indicating that women in roles on the path toward athletic director positions (e.g., senior woman administrator) are perceived as more likely to obtain AD positions than those in academic counselor, student-athlete development, and compliance roles (Hanks et al., 2019; Katz et al., 2018; Lapchick, 2010; Smith et al., 2019; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). These findings may suggest the need for men in senior-level roles to be more accepting of allowing women the opportunity to gain these skill sets through budgetary and sport oversight as well as fundraising experiences.

### **Sport Supervision**

In addition to gaining budgetary and fundraising experience, participants indicated the desire to gain sport supervision experience, particularly with football and basketball. This is consistent with Taylor and Hardin's (2016) research, which concluded that there are four primary challenges to reaching maximum career mobility: (a) lack of female role models, (b) females are not qualified to manage football programs, (c) scrutiny about lack of ability and experience, and d) benefits of intercollegiate coaching experience. Taylor and Hardin (2016) also found that women face increased scrutiny from the public, the media, and others regarding their lack of experience with non-female sports, especially football. Likewise, one participant of this research stated:

I said to our athletic director, I need you to formally name me sport supervisor for football. Because I know that from a career standpoint, I need that. I have to be

able to say I did that and did it for real, and it's on the resume. Or it's gonna be a credibility thing for me.

This participant also discussed how many in athletics administration assume that women cannot oversee football because they did not play football. This is consistent with previous research suggesting the presence of access and treatment discrimination of women in intercollegiate athletics administration (Hoffman, 2010; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Tiell et al., 2012). Access and treatment discrimination occurs when certain groups are denied the opportunity to enter an organization (Greenhaus et al., 1990). For example, women in SWA positions have been denied opportunities to oversee areas of athletics that are vital to their career development (budgets, men's sports programs) (Hoffman, 2010; Tiell et al., 2012). Without these critical experiences, women will continue to lag behind their male counterparts in their career advancement opportunities.

## **Research Question 2**

In examining Research Question 2: "What are the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments?", multiple themes emerged, including stereotypes, intersectional constraints, and gratitude for career opportunities. Stereotypes included two sub-themes, *traditional roles*, and a *lack of inclusion*. Sub-themes of intersectional constraints included *gender*, *race*, *parental status*, and *sexual orientation*. Despite the fact that participants were unequivocally satisfied with their career experiences, they have encountered stereotypes and intersectional constraints throughout their professional careers.

## **Stereotypes**

Experiencing stereotypes is consistent with previous literature indicating a culture of masculinity and stereotyping within intercollegiate athletics administration (Hanks et al., 2019; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Nastvogel et al., 2018; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Nastvogel et al. (2018) indicated that if women in leadership positions speak up, they can change the culture and increase the pathway for other women in senior-level positions. The findings of this study are consistent with Nastvogel et al. (2018) in that participants discussed the desire to uplift other women within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration. Participants indicated that because other women have helped them achieve to the level they have, they want to mentor other women toward senior-level positions. Furthermore, participants cited the need to be aggressive at times in order to be heard. This also is consistent with findings from Nastvogel et al.'s (2018) research.

## ***Traditional Roles***

Previous literature has focused on gender roles and the ways in which gender constrains the career advancement of women in sport leadership positions (Bower et al., 2015; Nastvogel et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2017; Taylor & Wells, 2017). Findings are consistent with Taylor et al. (2017), specifically with regard to procedures that can be implemented by intercollegiate athletic departments to help facilitate a work-life balance for women in senior-level administration roles. Participants indicated that services such as childcare during athletic events and/or stipends for childcare providers would be helpful in providing a work-life balance for women in senior-level roles. Taylor and Wells (2017) indicated that intercollegiate athletic

departmental culture may not be supportive of female employees utilizing these benefits. However, participants in this study cited the need for these benefits for both male and female employees.

Participants cited occupational stereotypes, including “being put in a box” with regard to professional titles. One participant discussed others’ preconceived notion that she would want to be in a more traditionally female role such as academic advising or athletic training. Similarly, this participant had no interest in those roles or in “being put in a box” of traditionally female roles. Another participant indicated that she was introduced as the Senior Woman Administrator (SWA). Senior Woman Administrator is the designation given to the highest-ranking woman in the athletic department that is not the athletic director (NCAA.org). When she stated that she had no interest in being an SWA, she was asked if she wanted “a seat at the table.” This participant already had a seat at the table despite not being the SWA. This is synonymous with the occupational stereotyping found in McDowell and Carter-Francique’s (2017) study, which found that judgments are made about women using occupational stereotypes. In this case, this participant was stereotyped as having to be an SWA to have a seat at the table. Though intercollegiate athletics administration still has a significant amount of work to do with regard to increasing the pathway for women in senior-level roles, women no longer have to be the SWA to have a seat at the table. Instead, more women are advancing into other areas of intercollegiate athletics administration, including internal and external affairs, marketing, sports communications, etc.

Similar to findings of previous research (McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Price et al., 2015; Simpkins et al., 2019), participants recognized the deep-rooted culture of hegemonic masculinity that exists within intercollegiate athletics, and discussed the way/s in which working in intercollegiate athletics has affected their personal and professional lives. Despite this, participants were grateful for their experiences and felt that the culture of intercollegiate athletics is getting better, albeit slowly.

Another commonality surrounding traditionally female roles that emerged from this research was participants' experiences of others assuming that males are in charge. For example, one participant described an experience of being at a photo shoot and being asked to take notes because she was the only woman in the room. In that instance, she indicated that she was in charge and advised the person asking to have one of the men in the room take notes. While women are increasingly assuming senior-level roles within intercollegiate athletics administration, assumptions regarding traditional male/female roles often are still made. One participant indicated that men need to be open to women being in their networks and taking on senior-level roles within intercollegiate athletics administration. This converges with previous research indicating that the "good old boys" network perpetuates access denial for women in sport organizations (Hoffman, 2011; Regan & Cunningham, 2012).

One participant discussed the "wives luncheon" at professional conferences for senior-level intercollegiate athletics administrators. In addition to the previously stated stereotypes, the assumption that spouses of male senior-level administrators are females also indicates the deep-rooted masculine culture that exists within intercollegiate



athletics. In this case, it is assumed that senior-level administrators are male. As this participant stated, “what happens when a gay male is named an athletic director?” At what point will intercollegiate athletics become more inclusive of non-traditional individuals in senior-level positions? Practices that exclude women (or their male spouses in this case) further perpetuate the masculine culture of intercollegiate athletics. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that hegemonic masculinity is maintained within intercollegiate athletics (Hanks et al., 2019; Price et al., 2015; Simpkins et al., 2019; Walker & Bopp, 2010; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013).

### ***Lack of Inclusion***

A feeling of exclusion was discussed by the participants. This feeling of exclusion often stemmed from conversations meant to exclude women, despite women being a part of the group. One participant discussed a conversation about neckties. In this particular (ongoing) conversation, male administrators joked about what days they wear ties. As this participant stated, “that conversation is not meant to include me.” Another example of a conversation that left participants feeling excluded was a coach apologizing to women for using foul language. Multiple participants discussed coaches apologizing for their language after cursing in meetings and/or pre/post game speeches. Participants indicated they would feel more comfortable if coaches would just go on with their meetings or speeches without “calling” the women out. While women often want to be recognized for what they bring to the table as women, participants stated that they would rather not be called out in these situations. They want to be viewed as strong individuals that can handle any language a coach (or anyone for that matter) is going to use. Research

indicates intercollegiate athletics is gender exclusive and resistant to change (Price et al., 2015; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin). The study participants' experiences speak to this notion. Though participants seem to have overcome the feeling of exclusion, the fact that these situations occur often, speaks to the culture of intercollegiate athletics administration and the indication that intercollegiate athletics must progress significantly with regard to inclusion.

### **Intersectional Constraints**

Participants cited various intersectional constraints throughout their professional careers. These challenges centered on gender, race, parental status, and sexual orientation. The challenges seemed to have made participants stronger professionally. Additionally, participants understood the integral role they have in increasing pathways for other women in senior-level intercollegiate athletics administration and the challenges associated with that role.

### ***Gender***

Findings are consistent with previous literature indicating that meso-level factors, including hegemonic masculinity and organizational operations influence leadership within intercollegiate athletics administration (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton, 2015; Burton & Peachey, 2014; Cunningham, 2010; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Nasvogel, 2018; Smith et al., 2019; Yiamouyiannis & Osborne, 2012). Participants did not view their gender as a hindrance to their career paths. Despite this, they discussed multiple instances of gender-related challenges. Examples included, awareness of being the only woman in the room during meetings, the idea that a woman cannot oversee football because she did

not play football and the need to prove oneself in a traditionally masculine industry.

These circumstances maintain the environment of hegemonic masculinity within intercollegiate athletics (see Price et al., 2015; Simpkins et al., 2019; Walker & Bopp, 2010; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013).

### ***Race***

Synonymous with previous research on Black women in intercollegiate athletics, participants indicated they felt the need to be the most knowledgeable, prepared person in the room (Edwards et al., 2020). Edwards and colleagues (2020) found that Black women exhibited perfectionistic sentiments, including the need to work harder than other races and genders to attain or keep the job. Consistent with Edwards et al. (2020), participants discussed the role that “minority stress” has in the experiences of Black women in intercollegiate athletics administration. Minority stress refers to the “additional stress that members of marginalized groups experience because of the prejudice and discrimination they face” (Center for Community Practice, n.d.).

One participant discussed the way/s in which athletic departments and conferences can support Black senior-level athletic administrators. More specifically, how can athletic departments support these individuals knowing that, as one participant put it, “the margin of error is smaller, you’re held to a higher standard, and the way you’re evaluated is stricter.” Hannum et al. (2015) also indicated that Women of Color experienced more scrutiny and criticism in their careers than White women. Further, this increased level of scrutiny may indicate the need for future research on how to support

Black senior-level athletic administrators and the reasoning behind higher standards for this demographic.

### ***Parental Status***

Participants indicated that certain procedures can be implemented by intercollegiate athletic departments to help facilitate work-life balance for parents. This is consistent with previous research (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Taylor et al., 2017; Taylor & Wells, 2017). Participants indicated that specific programs such as childcare during athletic events and/or stipends for childcare would be helpful in providing a work-life balance for both men and women in senior-level athletic administration roles. Taylor and Wells (2017) indicated that intercollegiate athletic departmental culture may not be supportive of employees utilizing these benefits.

One participant discussed the challenges she has encountered as a result of her parental status. She described being excluded from recruiting on a Saturday because it was assumed that because she had kids, she was busy. She would have preferred to have been asked to recruit. This is consistent with findings from Nastvogel et al.'s (2018) research, which indicated the stigma that women are too busy taking care of family to pursue senior-level positions. Conversely, it is sometimes assumed that administrators who are single are always available to take on additional work duties.

### ***Sexual Orientation***

Walker and Melton (2015) found that sexual orientation and appearance influence job stability and career advancement opportunities within intercollegiate athletics administration. Previous research indicated coming out could hinder their opportunities

for advancement (Walker and Melton, 2015). Similarly, one participant in this research described an experience in which she believes she was not offered a promotion because of her sexual orientation and appearance. Despite this, she indicated she is grateful for her career experiences and realizes that had she advanced, she would not have found her current institution. Furthermore, she indicated that her current supervisors are fully aware of her sexuality, and she is comfortable with her colleagues. This is consistent with findings of Melton and Cunningham's (2014) findings indicating that LGBTQIA+ employees often rely on supportive coworkers for identity affirmation and acceptance.

### **Gratitude**

Despite having encountered various challenges throughout their professional careers, participants felt an immense sense of gratitude for their career experiences and for their paths to senior-level leadership. They indicated that although the landscape of intercollegiate athletics administration is improving, there is still significant progress to be made. This is consistent with previous research findings indicating the landscape is improving at a slow pace (Hanks, et. al., 2019; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). Further, this aligns with the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports (TIDES) 2019 report on race and gender diversity, indicating intercollegiate athletics lags behind other industries with regard to diversity and inclusion (Lapchick, 2020).

### **Research Question 3**

Multiple themes emerged in relation to Research Question 3: What resources/supports do women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments desire in their professional development? These

themes included mentorship, support from male colleagues and industry knowledge. Mentorship included multiple sub-themes, including female mentors, mentorship of Women of Color, and mentoring others.

## **Mentorship**

Mentoring is defined as “a process in which a more experienced person (i.e., the mentor) serves as a role model, provides guidance and support to a developing novice (i.e., the protégé), and sponsors that individual’s career progress” (Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999, p. 25). With regard to the importance of mentorship, findings are consistent with previous literature exploring women’s career experiences in intercollegiate athletics administration (Hancock & Hums, 2015; Hanks et al., 2019; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Katz et al., 2018; Samble et al., 2017; Taitano & Basinger, 2016; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). In particular, this research indicates that mentorship leads to greater career advancement opportunities due to the networking opportunities it provides women (Hancock & Hums, 2016; Hancock et al., 2017; Katz et al., 2018).

Previous research indicates that compared to men, women do not have the same access to the social capital needed to obtain high level career opportunities within athletics (Walker & Bopp, 2013). Conversely, findings of this research indicate that this group of women has, in fact, had access to the social capital necessary to obtain senior-level positions. The individuals placed along the career paths of the women interviewed have been instrumental to their career advancement. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this finding cannot be generalized to all women working in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration.

### ***Female Mentors***

Previous literature has shown that the presence of a female mentor may benefit women in intercollegiate athletics administration (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Hancock et al., 2017). Acosta and Carpenter (2014) found that female student-athletes may benefit from being coached by a woman, as they are exposed to opportunities in sport management and have access to female role models (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Bower & Hums, 2013; Taitano & Basinger, 2016). Multiple participants indicated they had a female role model or mentor that assisted them in developing an interest in the industry as well as gaining exposure to the opportunities presented. This is consistent with previous research indicating that mentors were able to assist participants in breaking into and advancing in the field (Hancock et al., 2017; Taitano & Basinger, 2016). Acosta and Carpenter (2014) also indicated that males have more role models than their female colleagues in Division I intercollegiate athletics administration. Consistent with Acosta and Carpenter (2014), not all participants spoke about the presence of female mentors throughout the careers. However, they indicated that all of their mentors, male and female, played critical roles in their pathways toward senior-level leadership.

### ***Mentorship of Women of Color***

Research indicates that mentorship is especially important for Women of Color who aspire to advance within intercollegiate athletics administration (Hanks et al., 2019). In studying the underrepresentation of Black women in intercollegiate athletics, Edwards et al. (2020) indicated that Black women need mentors who resemble them, professional development, a networking community, and more confidence. Only one participant of

this research indicated that she had a Black, female mentor. She indicated that this mentor has been instrumental in her professional development and that she has been someone to look toward and emulate. The fact that only one participant mentioned a Black female role model in the industry may indicate that fewer Black women are in senior-leadership positions compared to White women. This is consistent with findings of previous research, which found that Black women experience the benefits of having a role model at a much lower rate than White women (Edwards et al., 2020). This also may indicate the need for more Black women in both pipeline positions as well as senior-level positions within intercollegiate athletics administration.

### ***Mentoring Others***

Taitano and Basinger (2016) indicated that Division I female ADs feel as though they can provide a launching pad for future female senior-level administrators. Whereas, Acosta and Carpenter (2014) suggested that female student-athletes coached by women are not only exposed to opportunities in sport management, they also have access to female role models. Participants indicated that their interest in intercollegiate athletics administration as a career path was sparked by a female role model within their athletic department. This included coaches, academic advisors, and SWAs. All participants discussed the obligation to mentor others in the industry. This obligation is largely because of the mentors that participants have had along their paths toward senior-level leadership. Finally, they indicated that mentors have a significant role in the advancement of women in Division I intercollegiate athletics administration. It is also worth noting that



the women interviewed indicated the desire to mentor both males and females, rather than solely mentoring females.

### **Support from Male Colleagues**

Literature on the career experiences of women in intercollegiate athletics administration has highlighted the importance of mentorship in career advancement opportunities (Hancock, 2012; Hanks et al., 2019; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Both McDowell and Carter-Francique (2017) and Hanks et al. (2019) indicated that male support influenced the career experiences of women in intercollegiate athletics administration. Katz et al. (2018) suggested that athletics is a male dominated field; and therefore, the formal and informal networks of women tend to be isolated based on gender. Likewise, the women interviewed in this study indicated that they desire the support of male colleagues. Participants stated the need for men in senior-level roles to be accepting of women entering into these roles. The support of male colleagues is instrumental in increasing the pathway for women in senior-level leadership positions within the Power 5 conferences. Though the “good old boys” club is still intact within intercollegiate athletics administration, one participant stated, “it is critically important that we have advocates in men in our industry. You know that they value different perspectives and opinions.”

### **Industry Knowledge**

In discussing the resources that women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics desire in their careers, participants indicated they feel as though there is a lack of knowledge about intercollegiate athletics administration as a

career path. In other words, women are not as knowledgeable about career opportunities in intercollegiate athletics administration as their male counterparts. Many participants became interested in intercollegiate athletics administration as a career path only after encountering injuries, potential eligibility issues, a change of major, or being introduced to the industry by a mentor. Participants indicated the desire to have been knowledgeable about career opportunities in intercollegiate athletics administration at a younger age. One participant stated, “I didn’t know it was an option. I thought I would go home and teach, because I didn’t really understand athletic administration or other areas.” The lack of knowledge of intercollegiate athletics administration as a career path illustrates the need for mentorship programs such as those mentioned in previous research. Previous literature has indicated that mentorship programs could assist women with knowledge of the industry as well as exposure to opportunities (Bower & Hums, 2013; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Katz et al., 2018; Walker & Bopp, 2013).

### **Theoretical Implications**

Chapter III included descriptions of both feminist theory and intersectionality. Feminist theory seeks to analyze gender as a category of experience in society (Coakley & Dunning, 2000; Hoffman, 2010; Walker & Melton, 2015; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). This research sought to analyze gender as a category of women’s career experiences in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments. Additionally, the study sought to understand how intersectionality, or the ways in which multiple identities (e.g., race, gender, class, political affiliation, sexual orientation, etc.) intersect to create unique career experiences (Carastathis, 2014;

Crenshaw, 1989; Edwards et al., 2020; Hanks, et al., 2019; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). Findings in relation to these theoretical frameworks are discussed in the following section.

### **Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory seeks to analyze gender as a category of experience in society (Coakley & Dunning, 2000). Utilizing a feminist theory lens allowed data to be viewed from a perspective of equality and social justice for female intercollegiate athletics administrators (Walker & Melton, 2015). Hoffman (2010) stated that feminist post-structuralism demonstrates the ways in which power is socially constructed through practices that disadvantage women. The study findings indicate that practices that disadvantage women, including stereotypes and intersectional constraints, persist within intercollegiate athletics administration, particularly at the Power 5 level. Further, initiatives that may increase the pathway for women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments (e.g., mentorship programs) and diversity and inclusion training are lacking. Despite this, the findings also suggest that a shift of power is occurring within intercollegiate athletics administration, such that women are slowly gaining power; and individuals in decision-making positions are becoming more comfortable with women in power such that the “good old boys” club is not as prevalent as it once was.

In examining support and mentorship from a feminist theory lens, sport as an institution, has made positive strides with regard to elevating women (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton, 2015; NCAA, 2019). However, the work to increase the

pathways for women in senior-level intercollegiate athletics administration must continue, particularly at the Power 5 level. This work may include, but is not limited to, formalized mentorship programming for women in Power 5 athletics administration, programs aimed at increasing women's awareness about careers in athletics administration, diversity and inclusion education, and hiring practices that are inclusive of women and other underrepresented groups. Participants indicated that those in decision-making positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration must be more inclusive of individuals from underrepresented groups in senior-level positions. Furthermore, individuals in leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration must be cognizant of uplifting others from underrepresented groups in an effort to increase the pathways for these individuals to attain senior-level administration positions. These findings serve to inform institutions, conferences, and governing bodies of the mentorship and support that women (and those from underrepresented groups) need to enter and advance in intercollegiate athletics administration. Though the culture of college athletics is improving with regard to the challenges that female athletic administrators face (Hanks, et al., 2017; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017), hegemonic masculinity persists within the institution of sport. Many of the women interviewed indicated they have had strong male mentors who uplifted them throughout their careers. This may indicate that although hegemonic masculinity exists, the "good old boys" club that has historically been present within intercollegiate athletics administration is beginning to dismantle.

## **Intersectionality**

Caratathis (2014) stated “In feminist theory, intersectionality has become the predominant way of conceptualizing the relation between systems of oppression which construct our multiple identities and our social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege” (p. 304). In analyzing findings from an intersectionality lens, the complexity of career experiences must be taken into account. By viewing the influence of every axis of social division present in one’s life, rather than one axis, these phenomena are best understood (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Thus, career experiences were not analyzed based on one aspect of a participant’s identity (e.g., woman). Instead, multiple identities were considered in analyzing their career experiences and the prejudices/biases they may face (e.g., woman, African-American, former student-athlete, mother, etc.).

Previous research examining intersectionality and workplace experiences indicates individuals with multiple intersecting identities (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation, etc.) have experienced challenges in the workplace (Edwards et al., 2020; Hanks et al., 2019; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). Similarly, findings of this research suggest that participants experienced challenges in the workplace based on their gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. These challenges included reminders of being the only woman in the room, a feeling of not being heard, the assumption that a woman cannot oversee a male sport such as football or men’s basketball and feeling as though women have something to prove.

Participants also indicated they experienced occupational stereotypes in the workplace. For example, the notion that a woman who has a seat at the table must be an

SWA, or that women desire traditionally female roles such as academic advising or athletic training. Challenges related to race and sexual orientation were also discussed. Participants reported feeling as if they needed to be the most knowledgeable and prepared person in the room and being limited by colleagues. Race has created an added level of pressure for these women in that their margin of error is smaller than their White counterparts.

Sexual orientation also affected participant career experiences. One participant recalled an experience in which she was judged and not given an opportunity to advance because of her sexual orientation and/or appearance. Fink et al. (2001) suggested that White, heterosexual males are the prototypical employee within sport organizations. Therefore, White males are afforded privileged status, while others are consigned to out-group status (Walker & Melton, 2015). In this case, this participant was consigned to the out-group because of her sexual orientation. Regardless of sexual orientation, men are afforded privilege because they are men (Fink et al., 2001; Shields, 2008; Walker & Melton, 2015). Despite encountering stereotypes, intersectional constraints, and prejudices, participants of this research have broken barriers and may increase the pathway for other women to enter intercollegiate athletics administration at the Power 5 level.

Whether decision-makers are ready or not, this research indicates that the landscape of senior-level intercollegiate athletics administration is changing. Consequently, decision-makers at the institutional, conference and governing levels must be open to allowing individuals from underrepresented groups “a seat at the table.” This

could assist with increasing the pathways for women and other underrepresented groups as well as lessening instances of intersectional constraints, stereotyping, prejudice, and oppression within intercollegiate athletics administration.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings indicate there is still considerable progress to be made in intercollegiate athletics administration with regard to diversity and inclusion. This research serves to inform institutions, conferences offices, and governing bodies (e.g., NCAA) of the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments; as well as programming and hiring practices that are critical to increasing the pathways for women in senior-level leadership positions within these conferences. This includes, but is not limited to mentorship programs, diversity and inclusion education/programming, programs aimed at enhancing work-life balance for female (and male) parents in intercollegiate athletics administration, and support and mentorship from males in leadership positions within the industry.

Mentorship programming for women in intercollegiate athletics administration is critical to career advancement (Hancock & Hums, 2016; Hancock et al., 2017; Katz et al., 2018). This research indicates that the creation of programs aimed at increasing mentorship opportunities for women in intercollegiate athletics administration, particularly at the Power 5 levels, may increase the pathways for women in senior-level leadership positions. This enhanced support system could also serve to retain women in the industry.

Though the culture of intercollegiate athletics administration has shifted to be more inclusive of women, there are still challenges that are not being addressed (e.g., lack of industry knowledge, gender role stereotyping, lack of inclusive language, programs for parents, opportunities to oversee male sport programs, etc.). Information sessions and conference attendance for young/new professionals may increase industry knowledge amongst women entering intercollegiate athletics administration. Moreover, as more women assume leadership roles within intercollegiate athletics administration, gender role stereotyping and the lack of inclusive language may diminish. Work-life balance programming and diversity initiatives could assist in increasing the pathways for women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments (Bower & Hums, 2013; Hancock et al., 2017; Hancock & Hums, 2015; 2016; Katz et al., 2018).

Finally, this research indicates that men in leadership positions within intercollegiate athletics administration are needed to change the culture. To increase the pathways for women (and underrepresented groups), it is critical that men in power positions expand their thought processes. The forward progress and dismantling of the “good old boys” club is dependent upon a collaborative effort. Likewise, institutions, conference offices, and governing bodies must continue to question how to push the industry forward with regard to diversity and inclusion.

### **Opportunities & Recommendations for Future Research**

This research adds to the body of literature on women’s career experiences in senior-level leadership within intercollegiate athletics administration. However, this study



was not without opportunities for future research. For example, participants were employed in two of the five Power 5 conferences. Interviewing women in senior-level leadership positions within all five of the power conferences may offer more evidence to strengthen the findings. Additionally, study participants ranged in age from 38-54 years of age. Though this is a large age range, interviewing women from a wider range of ages may strengthen the study findings.

There is an absence of research on the career experiences of women in mid-level management positions within the Power 5 athletic conferences. This research examined the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments. An exploration of the career experiences of women in mid-level management positions also is warranted. This could be helpful in understanding career experiences, the lack of women in “pipeline” positions, and the way/s in which the pathways toward senior-level leadership can be increased for women and other underrepresented groups.

Study participants indicated a feeling of “minority stress” throughout their careers. Further exploration of the “minority stress” experienced by underrepresented groups in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration may be helpful in understanding the career experiences of underrepresented groups in intercollegiate athletics administration. Although this topic has been researched recently (Edwards et al., 2020), further investigation is needed to fully understand this phenomenon and the way/s in which it affects career experiences.

One participant discussed her parental status and how it has affected her career experiences. Specifically, she spoke about a lack of inclusion in certain job-related activities (e.g., Saturday recruiting). In this case, it was assumed that because she had children, she was unavailable. The way/s in which parental and marital status affects the experiences of senior-level leaders within Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration has not been widely researched. However, these phenomena could be explored further.

Finally, multiple participants cited an uncertainty about the future of college athletics. With the continued evolution of the contemporary student-athlete, intercollegiate athletics administration, as well as evolving conference and NCAA rules and regulations, an exploration of the future of college athletics may be helpful in understanding the direction of intercollegiate athletics, from the perspective of administrators. Despite intercollegiate athletics being an ever-changing industry, these perspectives may serve to inform institutions, conference offices and governing bodies.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments. Findings suggested four themes to illustrate the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments: (a) pathways to senior-level leadership (b) support and mentorship, (c) stereotypes, and (d) intersectional constraints. The essence of participant experiences revealed that although their pathways into intercollegiate athletics administration were non-aspirational, they advanced into senior-level roles with the support and mentorship of others. Both male

and female mentors were cited as critical to entering the industry as well as advancing in intercollegiate athletics administration. Participants recalled instances of encountering and overcoming challenges throughout their careers. In spite of these challenges, they indicated that intercollegiate athletics administration is making progress with regard to diversity and inclusion, albeit at a slow pace. Finally, participants expressed a feeling of gratitude for their career experiences and opportunities.

Though findings indicated that the deep-rooted masculine culture of intercollegiate athletics administration is becoming less prevalent (Hanks et al., 2019; Price et al., 2015; Simpkins et al., 2019; Walker & Bopp, 2010; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013), stereotypes and intersectional constraints still exist for women in Power 5 intercollegiate athletics administration roles. Despite encountering gender and diversity challenges throughout the careers, participants were extremely grateful for their experiences, the work they are able to do on a daily basis, as well as the role they play in increasing the pathway for women (and other underrepresented groups) in intercollegiate athletics administration. Women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments are continually being challenged to evolve professionally and play an instrumental role in increasing the pathways for women (and other underrepresented groups) in senior-level leadership roles within intercollegiate athletics administration. The evolution of intercollegiate athletics administration is dependent upon the commitment of everyone involved. Most importantly, this includes individuals in decision-making roles at the institutional, conference and governing levels. With this collaborative effort, the hegemonic masculinity that perpetuates intercollegiate

athletics may be diminished. Further, as more women and individuals from underrepresented groups are afforded opportunities to have seats at the table, the “good old boys” club that has historically been engrained in intercollegiate athletics may be dismantled.

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## **Appendix**

### **Appendix A**

#### **The Career Experiences of Women in Senior-Level Leadership Positions within Power 5 Athletic Departments: A Phenomenological Study**

Participant Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The purpose of this research is to collect data on the career experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 athletic departments. All information collected in this study will be kept strictly confidential. All respondents will be protected through the use of pseudonyms.

1. Tell me about your background in athletics.
2. What motivated you to choose a career in college athletics?
3. What do you perceive to have been or are the most critical support/s or resource/s to your career?
4. Who are your mentors and how have they influenced you professionally? Please note that any names given will be masked with pseudonyms and no identifying information will be used.
5. Please discuss a challenge or barrier you have encountered in your career.
6. In what way/s do you feel your gender or any other socially constructed identity has influenced your career?
7. Is there a time when you were consciously aware of being a woman working in college athletics?

- a. If so, please describe/discuss that experience
8. In what ways have you been able to advocate for or help other women who aspire to work in college athletics or seek to be in a position like yours?
  9. Would you describe your experience as a senior-level athletic administrator in the Power 5 as different than what you expected? How so/or please describe.
  10. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your professional experience/s in college athletics?

## Appendix B

### **The Career Experiences of Women in Senior-Level Leadership Positions within Power 5 Athletic Departments: A Phenomenological Study**

#### **Participant Demographic Data Form**

Please fill in this demographic data form to the best of your ability. You are free to skip any questions you prefer not to answer. All information collected in this study will be kept strictly confidential.

**Name:**

**Age:**

**Race/Ethnicity:**

**Email address:**

**Current Employer:**

**Current title:**

**Number of years in college athletics:**

**Number of years in current role:**

**Previous positions held in college athletics (please list institution/s and position/s):**

**Highest degree earned:**

**Academic background (Major):**

**Did you compete in an NCAA sponsored sport? If so, please list sport and division.**



## Appendix C

<i>Research Questions in Relation to Data Collection Tools</i>	
Research Question	Interview Question
What are the backgrounds of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments (sport participation, coaching, educational, career)?	Question 1
What is the career experience of women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments?	Questions 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9 & 10
What resources/support do women in senior-level leadership positions within Power 5 intercollegiate athletic departments desire in their professional development?	Questions 2, 3, & 8

## **VITA**

Lynsey Miller was born in Berkeley, California and raised in Northern California and Buffalo, New York. Prior to attending the University of Tennessee, she attended Daemen College (Amherst, NY), where she earned a Bachelor of arts in Psychology in 2005 and competed on the women's soccer team. From 2005 to 2007, she attended Ball State University (Muncie, IN), where she earned a Master of Arts in Sport & Exercise Psychology. She also earned a Master of Science in Sport Administration in 2011 from Canisius College (Buffalo, NY).

While at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Lynsey served as an academic counselor for the football, women's soccer, and women's tennis programs. She also served on various committees including TennACADA, the Chancellor's Commission for Women, and the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A).

Currently, Lynsey is the Change Management & Interface Lead at Tesla in Austin, Texas. She lives in Austin, Texas.